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US Army Counterinsurgency Operations

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### Abstract

They say, history repeats itself. Counterinsurgency operations are imbedded in our past and we prepare for them in every situation today. If we expect our military forces to succeed in these operations, we must train them to avoid any mistakes we made in past experiences. This paper will compare the counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam and Iraq. It will explore some key mistakes made in Vietnam and point out how we are avoiding those mistakes in Iraq. It asks the question, did we win in Vietnam and are we winning in Iraq and provides a perspective on the question.

When President Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke of the “Domino Effect” in his news conference on April 7, 1954, did he have any idea of the storm brewing on the horizon? He feared communism would spread throughout Indochina and other countries until it consumed the entire free world. He would not allow this to cause the demise of our democratic way of life (Domino Theory Principle, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954).

During the summer of 1965, the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) cut two major supply routes between the highlands and the coast, highway 19 and 21 (Herring, 305). The U.S. responded by expanding the number of American troops in Vietnam and committing U.S. forces directly to battle.<sup>1</sup>

While the North grew stronger, the South Vietnamese Army seemed stagnant and weakened in their growth. The South Vietnamese military now took the defensive posture more than the offensive. Contact with the enemy was rare. The hamlets, widely scattered by choice when built by President Diem, were now indefensible and quickly fell into the hands of the North (American Military History, 300).<sup>2</sup>

The leader of South Vietnam, President Ngo Dinh Diem, made feeble attempts to bring reform to South Vietnam but failed. His inefficient militia did little to protect the hamlets.<sup>3</sup> The peasants, forced to leave their homelands and labor in distant locations, were lucky if they received payment on time or at all. These factors and the menace from the North eliminated most support the peasants offered for reform implemented by the government. The local people endured years of atrocities from both sides; their homes burned or blown up, their fields burned,

and their children taken to serve in the war effort. The U.S. involvement in Vietnam brought no improvement to the lives of the Vietnamese.

Inaccurate reports from the battlefield through the chain of command to U.S. advisors painted a misleading picture of progress. Field commanders, wishing to “Look Good” to President Diem, falsified progress reports on security of the hamlets in their areas. The U.S., lacking visibility down to that level, was also misled.

The U.S. had visibility of the leadership style/abilities of President Diem. They knew he made critical decisions without consulting his cabinet or the U.S. advisors (American Military History, 300).

The U.S. felt they would need more control in Vietnam if they were going to win. In 1963, U.S. Officials condoned a coup against President Diem (Prados, 2003). Little did they know he and his brother would die one day after being overthrown.

The U.S. knew how to wage full combat operations but not a guerilla type skirmish. The South Vietnamese could handle themselves in guerilla warfare but not full combat operations. We failed to train for the fight and we failed to train the South Vietnamese for their fight. They would have to face it as best they could after we pulled out.

So, having gone to Vietnam to stem the flow of Communism, we departed a war torn nation which succumbed to communist rule anyway. Without Vietnam, would we be a “fallen domino” today?

Most of our Soldiers came home and resumed their normal lives. Some adopted a different view of normal, either by choice or necessity. Some never came home. Very few were received as returning heroes. I personally walked the full three miles across my hometown in my Class “A” uniform with my duffle bag on my shoulder. Several classmates stared intensely at me as they passed in their car. I saw the recognition in their eyes. I did not go to Vietnam but my hometown marked me as one that did. That was okay with me.

We lost the battle in Vietnam but learned some valuable lessons. To save someone from oppression, you must offer them hope of attaining something better. You must present them an achievable goal and help them build a path to it. Today, involved in another war, in another country, with another enemy (terrorists), we are doing that.

Terrorism started long before September 11, 2001. I was introduced to it in 1972 when I received a phone call from my First Sergeant at 02:00 a.m. with explicit instructions to “get my gear and get on post immediately”. I was stationed at Wildflecken, West Germany at the time. Most of us heard of the 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic Games and what happened to them at the hands of terrorists. There were acts of terrorism against the U.S. recorded throughout the pages of history prior to “9/11. “9/11” was the one that opened our eyes to the fact that terrorists will operate anywhere we allow them to.

Tracing the key operatives of the “9/11” attack on the World Trade Center back to the al-Qaeda terrorist network organized by Osama bin Laden, the U.S. mounted missile attacks against

training bases in Afghanistan. Given the terrain and the terrorists' knowledge of the area, the attacks were ineffective at best.

Still, the strong holds of the al-Qaeda and Taliban located in the rugged Afghanistan mountains were short lived. Special Forces, with the help of local tribes known as the Northern Alliance, infiltrated the enemy lines. When the operation was finished, there were 18 A Teams, 4 Company level B Teams, and 3 Battalion level C Teams entrenched in the rugged terrain of Afghanistan. How did they get there?

Moving through the dangerous passes under the cover of darkness by helicopter to predetermined landing zones, they linked up with chiefs of the Northern Alliance and moved to their designated base camps within the mountains by truck, horseback, or on foot. There they emplaced the special weapons they transported with them; satellite communications. Armed with laser designators, state-of-the-art optics and global positioning system (GPS) technology, they brought in precision-guided munitions (PGM) on one target after another. We now had eyes on target and the ability to place munitions on it with pinpoint accuracy. What we saw we hit, and what we hit, we killed (American Military History, 465).

It did not take long to squeeze the terrorists from their hiding places in the mountains and when we did, they melted back into the cities to become what appeared to be normal citizens, biding their time. Some of the cities they chose happened to be in the country of Iraq.

Iraq was beginning to become quite a conversation piece on the evening news. The phrase, "Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)", was one everyone was familiar with. Although

we have yet to find any WMD, we did find a tyrannical ruler who was reportedly guilty of inflicting horrendous crimes against humanity. We found a people hungry for freedom and willing to fight for it. We also found those that were interested in keeping things just the way they were, under their “iron fisted” control with no freedom for anyone except themselves.

Having learned from our experience in Vietnam, the U.S. began taking steps to ensure our victory in Iraq. The 2003 invasion of Iraq saw Saddam Hussein fall from power with an interim government replacing him. In 2005, Iraq began writing their first constitution and held what the people considered the first genuinely free elections in Iraq’s history, which included a fair representation of all ethnic groups in the country, a very stark contrast to previous elections in the country (Elections in Iraq).

We learned that it is better to take \$10,000 and hire the local population to dig a ditch with hand tools than to burn \$10,000 in diesel fuel using our machinery digging the ditch for them. We are putting the Iraqi people to work so they can feed and clothe their families. We are assisting them in rebuilding their infrastructure.

The Vietnam War taught us it is better to stay a while and ensure the locals can guard against the insurgent’s return. Albeit the locals in Iraq are ready for the coalition forces to leave, our experience in Vietnam tells us there are certain milestones the Iraqis must reach before that can safely happen. They know they have to ensure they are capable of self support; otherwise, we will have lost all we fought so hard to gain.<sup>4</sup>

During the Vietnam conflict, 30,678 reservists were called to Active Duty. Since “9/11”, 370,619 reservists have served at least one tour of active duty (Guardsmen, reservists hit hard). Looking around at the yellow ribbons tied on the trees and magnetic stickers on the backs of vehicles, it is easy to believe this war is the most popular war of all times. So many prideful Americans want to acknowledge our service and shake a Soldier’s hand. They always say one thing “thank you, for serving our country”. It was not that way in the ‘70s during or after Vietnam. I am thankful Americans’ attitudes have changed.

God Bless our Soldiers!

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<sup>1</sup>The U.S. never officially declared war on Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup> As the Viet Cong became stronger and bolder, the South Vietnamese Army became more cautious and less offensive minded. Government forces became reluctant to respond to Viet Cong depredations in the countryside, avoided night operations, and resorted to ponderous sweeps against vague military objectives, rarely making contact with their enemies. Meanwhile, the Viet Cong concentrated on destroying strategic hamlets, showing that they considered the settlements, rather than the South Vietnamese Army, the greater danger to the insurgency. Poorly defended hamlets and outposts were overrun or subverted by enemy agents who infiltrated with peasants arriving from the countryside. The Viet Cong's campaign profited from the government's failures. The government built too many hamlets to defend. [AMERICAN MILITARY HISTORY PAGE 299]

<sup>3</sup>President Diem



<sup>4</sup> While a large majority of Iraqis do not like the presence of coalition forces, during a February 2005 Baghdad survey, the question was posed as to when coalition forces should leave Iraq. In the Task Force Baghdad area of operations, 72 percent of those polled stated that only after certain security and economic conditions were met would it be appropriate for coalition forces to leave. This clearly demonstrated to the task force that although the Iraqi populace inherently did not like the presence of coalition forces in their country, they understood the value of that presence and the need to first establish certain conditions before withdrawal began. (<http://www.army.mil>)