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Failure vs. Insurgency during the Vietnam War due to Doctrine

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The origin of Insurgency in South Vietnam occurred during the period of 1954 to 1960. This was because North Vietnam communists were attempting to convert South Vietnam to a unified communist country. Because of the South Vietnam resistance, the north adopted an insurgent style of fighting in order to force the south to conform. The United States and allies were not prepared for this style of fighting because of their current battlefield doctrine. It would take many years and many mistakes before we would learn and change our doctrines.

Before the beginning of the Vietnam War, North Vietnamese officials attempted to use the diplomatic approach to convince South Vietnam to become a unified Communist country. South Vietnam resisted and then came the insurgency. The forces of the Northern Liberation Front (NLF) began infiltrating the national infrastructure throughout South Vietnam. There was a large presence of North Vietnamese Forces in the towns and villages of South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese also recruited South Vietnamese who supported their cause to join them in their efforts. Therefore, prior to the beginning of the war, the North Vietnamese had already established a strong presence, blended into the local population of South Vietnam. This made it difficult for South Vietnam to build a strong defense against the north. With the arrival of the United States and its allies to Vietnam and their doctrinal style of fighting, it became clear that they were unprepared to counter the guerrilla warfare tactics.

Prior to the Vietnam War, the United States based its style of warfare on strategies learned during previous wars. This involved open battlefields and definite identification of the enemy. However, Vietnam was a mountainous country with thick vegetation and the enemy blended in with the local populous and did not fight the way we expected them to. The structure of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) included the VC (Vietcong) Main Force Unit, regional forces, and village guerrillas. The Main force unit and the regional forces consisted of elite Soldiers and Soldiers loyal to North Vietnam respectively who trained as conventional Soldiers. The village guerillas were part-time fighters and helpers, carrying out minor harassment operations like sniping or mine/booby trap laying, building local fortifications or supply caches, and transporting supplies and equipment. Mostly peasant farmers, these militia style units were under the control of low level NLF or Front leadership. (Pike) (1996 pp. 37-169) The

insurgents occupied small villages in densely forest area and complex trench systems. This made it easier for them to execute well-planned ambushes and attacks with minimal forces. The United States and Allied forces was not accustomed or trained for this type of tactics or terrain. Even with our advanced technology and equipment, we were unable to utilize them because the battle space was not conducive to using artillery on open terrain or concentrating bombing on small or large areas. Because the battle space resembled that of close quarters combat, there was an enormous risk of causing damage to the local population as well as allied forces. We were slow to adopt changes and tactics to counter this style of warfare. There were major psychological impacts on the forces due to unpreparedness and unpredictability.

It was obvious that there was a need for change or addition to our doctrine. In the field, the situation forced troops and commanders to adopt new tactics for their survivability. These changes created positive and negative consequences for both sides. Some of the negatives were loss of innocent lives due to the inability of properly identify the true enemy within a village. In addition, some of these areas we destroyed unnecessarily because we were not able to pinpoint the exact locations of enemy camps. Although it may have been difficult, a proper assessment prior to deploying our Soldiers to Vietnam would have been necessary to train and prepare them for the type of enemy they would have to face. The assessment would take into consideration the terrain and enemy presence. Military leaders would have the opportunity to make improvement on tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). The counter-strategy could have been successful if we had implemented an adjustment to the political restrictions. The American forces were restricted on what they could do because of the fear of political impacts due to their actions.

One argument states that if the US focused on pacification, there would have been a greater chance of success. The main effort would have been to uproot the communist infrastructure first and then focus on the smaller insurgent groups who had populated the small

villages and key border points. Another argument was the effective use of the search and destroy strategy. The US would use large battalion sized forces to attack Communist concentrated areas and main supply routes for the enemy. (Hennessey) (1997, pp. 13-181)

The US used tactics that some thought to be widely counter-productive. The harassment and interdiction fires (H&I), deployment of heavy artillery and bombs in populated areas, and the creation of "free-fire" zones. This caused the US to be under scrutiny for the morality and legality of those tactics.

The insurgency of South Vietnam caused a great set back to the success and progression of the US efforts during the Vietnam War. It made it difficult to tell the friend from foe and to determine decisive areas that would eventually lead to the defeat of the enemy. Not until the Iraq war did, we produce a doctrine on counter-insurgency even though insurgency is not a new tactic. From the Vietnam War specifically, we would learn that it puts us at a great disadvantage to go into a fight when the enemy is collocated with the very people we are attempting to defend. Because we are fighting on their soil, we automatically lose the advantage of knowledge of terrain and the element of surprise. Being prepared to counter that strategy was a key. The US learned many lessons from the Vietnam War, but it also prepared us for the conflicts that we face today that are of similar nature. We fight on foreign soil where the enemy has the advantage of knowledge of terrain, assimilation into to the general population and the use unconventional tactics. With the recent fighting in Iraq against insurgents, the US military wrote and published a doctrine on countering insurgents. If during the Vietnam War we developed such a book from the lessons learned, produced, and implemented them, then the war in Vietnam would have dramatically changed.

Michael A. Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972* (Praeger Publishers: 1997), pp. 13-181

Douglas Pike, *PAVN: Peoples Army of Vietnam*, (Presidio: 1996) pp. 37-169

Lt. General Philip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946-1975*, (Presidio Press: 1988), pp. 325-470; 795-811.