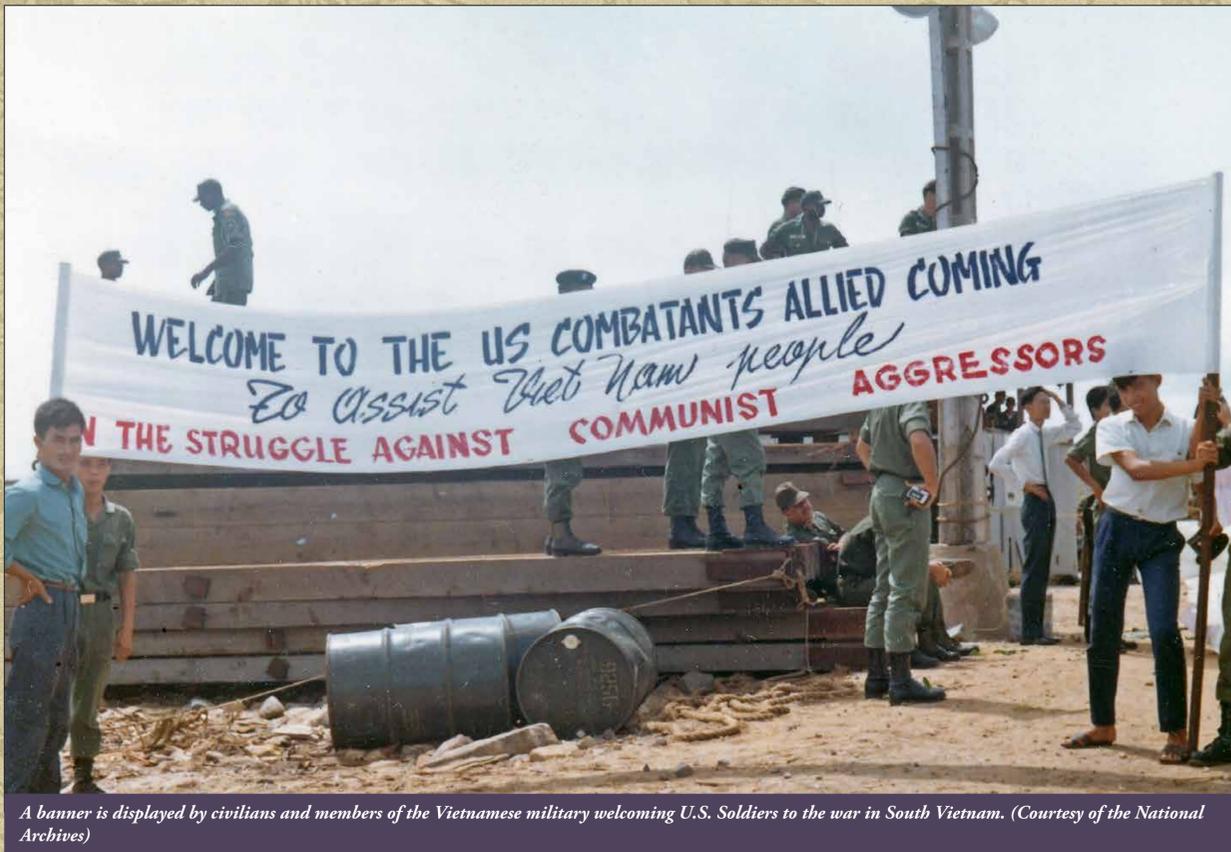


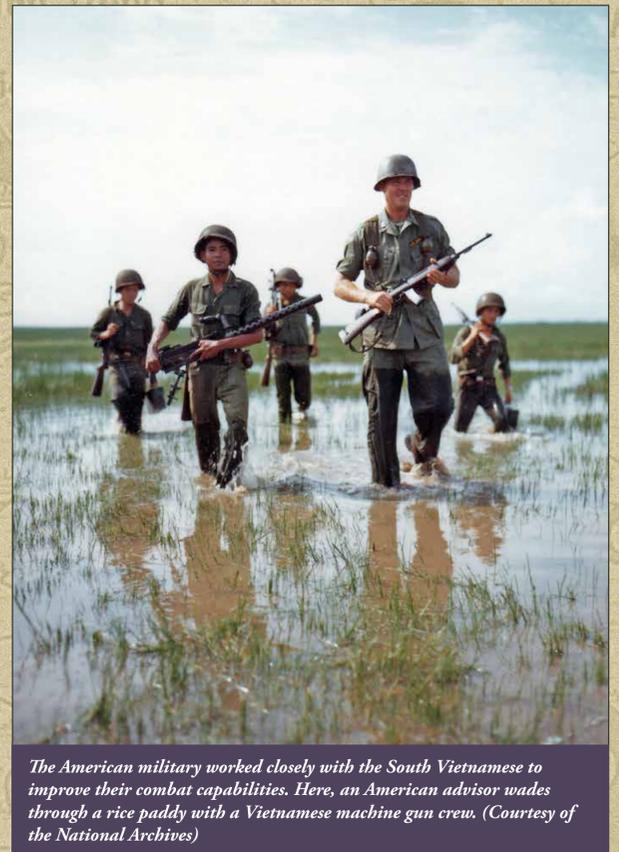


COUNTERINSURGENCY IN THE VIETNAM WAR

PART 1 OF 4



A banner is displayed by civilians and members of the Vietnamese military welcoming U.S. Soldiers to the war in South Vietnam. (Courtesy of the National Archives)



The American military worked closely with the South Vietnamese to improve their combat capabilities. Here, an American advisor wades through a rice paddy with a Vietnamese machine gun crew. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

[Military Assistance Command Vietnam's Mission was] to assist the Government of Vietnam and its armed forces to defeat externally directed and supported communist subversion and aggression and attain an independent South Vietnam functioning in a secure environment.

— General William Westmoreland

The United States committed to South Vietnam to prevent further Communist expansion into mainland Southeast Asia. Success hinged on unifying two distinct goals: the creation of legitimate political authority, state infrastructure, and a free-market economy in South Vietnam, and the destruction of internal and external military threats. To reconcile the two, the U.S. and South Vietnam turned to noted experts in counterinsurgency: Sir Robert Thompson, a British military officer; U.S. Air Force officer and Central Intelligence Agency operative Edward Lansdale; and U.S. Army officer Sam Wilson. They concluded, as Wilson put it, the war in South Vietnam was as "political in nature as...military." Yet though the U.S., South Vietnam, and its allies were in agreement on the end goal, their approach to state-building and defeating South Vietnam's enemies were often divided and disconnected.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, NVA and VC successes forced the U.S. to steadily increase its aid to South Vietnam until, finally, in 1965, the U.S. deployed its military to assume the bulk of fighting and stave off collapse. U.S. political and military experts believed stability in South Vietnam impossible so long as infiltration and insurrection continued unabated. Faced with an externally supported insurgency, the U.S., South Vietnam, and its allies simultaneously fought to eliminate the NVA and VC threats while developing South Vietnam into a stable non-Communist nation-state. Counterinsurgency's purpose in Vietnam was to bring these goals together into a single cohesive strategy. The strategy was the paradox of destroying an enemy threat while creating a viable state. It fell to the U.S., South Vietnam, and its allies' to resolve this contradiction.

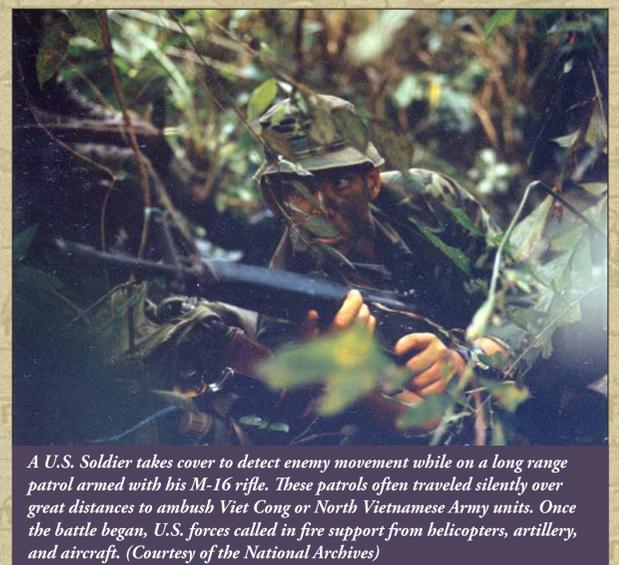
SETTING THE STAGE

South Vietnam's climate, geography, and the dispersion of its population posed a daunting challenge. State-building, defeating the Viet Cong, and throwing back the North Vietnamese Army required a significant ground force. Yet, barring a few densely populated cities, South Vietnam's population was spread far too thin for government forces to be present everywhere at once. Most of the South's population lived in small communities and worked in agriculture. In the south, they were found in the wet lowlands; further north, they lived among high mountains that rested underneath a tremendous jungle canopy. Much of the arable land was flooded to grow rice and taro, which made traveling by foot treacherous and slow; South Vietnam's extreme heat, humidity, and frequent rain made soldiering miserable further still. Though similar in total square miles to Oklahoma, South Vietnam's land mass was compressed into a long and narrow state whose western border ran for more than 1000 miles.

On the other side of that border, the North Vietnamese Army and coolie laborers developed the Ho Chi Minh Trail through the nations of Laos and Cambodia. From this trail, they traveled south to multiple entry points in South Vietnam beyond the reach of U.S. and South Vietnamese ground forces. Their many points of entry pulled military forces away from South Vietnam's population, forced the U.S., South Vietnam, and its allies to defend the entirety of the nation, and spread South Vietnam's defenders thin.

The U.S.'s geopolitical concerns limited its willingness to carry the fight beyond South Vietnam's borders. Fearful of provoking Chinese or Soviet intervention, the U.S. deliberately restricted its ground units to South Vietnam for most of the war. To isolate the South from the North, the

U.S. deployed its Navy to patrol South Vietnam's waterways and block the North's entry to the South through the Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea. Later in the war, the U.S. mined Haiphong harbor in North Vietnam. To slow North Vietnam's access to the South on land, the U.S. Air Force and naval aviation bombed facilities in North Vietnam, and North Vietnamese forces as they traveled through Laos and Cambodia. Excepting clandestine operations across the borders, and intensive bombing campaigns carried out by the U.S. Air Force and Navy, the bulk of U.S. ground operations centered on state-building efforts and defeating the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong from within South Vietnam's borders.



A U.S. Soldier takes cover to detect enemy movement while on a long range patrol armed with his M-16 rifle. These patrols often traveled silently over great distances to ambush Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army units. Once the battle began, U.S. forces called in fire support from helicopters, artillery, and aircraft. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

MULTIPLE OVERLAPPING EFFORTS

U.S. aims to build a stable South Vietnamese state and defeat the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong were inextricably linked. At stake was far more than countering the Viet Cong insurgents. They were merely one barrier to success, yet the U.S., South Vietnam, and its allies frequently disagreed on where the central focus in Vietnam ought to rest. Regardless of disagreement, successful counterinsurgency in Vietnam needed to remove the North Vietnamese Army threat, sever ties between North Vietnam and the Viet Cong, root out the Viet Cong, establish governance, and bind locals to a growing South Vietnamese state.

U.S. experts hoped that equipping South Vietnam with financial, logistical, and military advisory support in the mid-1950s would be enough to see the state flourish without the intervention of large U.S. military units. U.S. engagement in South Vietnam began with state-building and the war against the Viet Cong.



It was difficult to tell the Viet Cong from South Vietnamese citizens. Not all Viet Cong were men wearing black pajamas. These prisoners were captured in mountain caves. A young woman in pink counts herself among the prisoners. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

By contrast, the Communists were far more cooperative in aim and execution. North Vietnam sought to undermine U.S. and South Vietnamese aims, collapse the South's government, and unify Vietnam as a single Communist nation. To that end it deployed the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) to fight in South Vietnam and to aid the Viet Cong (VC), a South Vietnam-based Communist paramilitary organization made up of insurgents who were eager to topple the fledgling government. Hardened political-military fighters well-versed in the North's aims dominated the ranks of the North Vietnamese Army. NVA regulars had previously fought against the Japanese in the 1940s and the French in the 1950s. They stood ready for decades more fighting against the U.S. and South Vietnam.

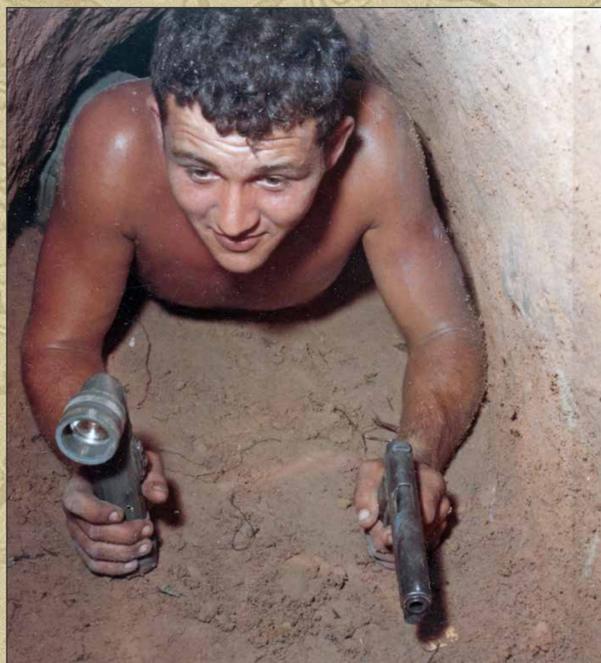
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COUNTERINSURGENCY IN THE VIETNAM WAR

PART 2 OF 4



The Viet Cong built a vast tunnel system underneath South Vietnam to ambush U.S., South Vietnamese, and allied troops, and to protect themselves from airpower and artillery. Within these vast tunnel complexes, they also maintained field hospitals, supply caches, and planned operations. When entrance holes were discovered, U.S. units frequently sent in their smallest and most nimble troops. The task was extremely dangerous, and the troops who entered earned the moniker "Tunnel Rats." (Courtesy of the National Archives)



South Vietnamese Civil Defense Group trainees are given a class in patrolling and ambush prior to participating in a practical exercise at Thua Thien training camp. These forces acted as the precursor to the Territorial Forces, and, as the war wound on, many of the more successful Civil Defense Groups were converted into Regional Force Units. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

There is another type of warfare—new in its intensity, ancient in its origin—war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, and assassins—war by ambush instead of combat, by infiltration instead of aggression—seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him.

— President John F. Kennedy

From 1954 to 1964, the U.S. sought to invigorate South Vietnam and extend its government's reach throughout the countryside by providing massive financial and logistical investments backed by military advisory support. If South Vietnam was able to pacify the countryside, then the U.S. reasoned the fledgling state would transform into a viable, free, and democratic nation. Backed by growing U.S. investments, South Vietnam worked with U.S. advisors to spread government power and influence throughout the country, expand its economy and state infrastructure, and root out the Viet Cong.

STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM

South Vietnam's Strategic Hamlet Program was one of the most ambitious efforts to pacify the countryside and neutralize the Viet Cong insurgents. Inaugurated in 1961, its goal was to move rural populaces to protected hamlets under government control. The strategic hamlets would physically and politically isolate the Viet Cong from the people.



Villagers in South Vietnam north of Saigon plant peanuts with the assistance of Regional Force personnel, who provided protection to the village. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

In concept, the program would place villagers in hamlets attached to a communications network from which they would summon local defense and quick reaction forces in case of emergency. In directly tying their protection to the South Vietnamese government, the program would bind the people South Vietnam's government and spread its control. To further cement the government's influence, the program promised to improve living standards.

The program's architects set overly ambitious goals. They called for the completion of 14,000 hamlets by early 1963 and another 5,000 by 1964. For their part, South Vietnam's locals were intimately tied to their ancestor's land and were reluctant to leave. In execution, the program was rife with corruption. Local officials fabricated numbers to appease leadership in Saigon. American officials inspecting the sites found the settlements wildly varied in terms of quality of defense and percentage of population under control. Once political turmoil took hold in Saigon in November of 1963, the Strategic Hamlet Program fizzled. Though South Vietnam's leadership implemented similar concepts throughout the war, these programs too suffered poor implementation, corruption, and Communist disruption.

TERRITORIAL FORCES

Territorial Forces made up about one-half of South Vietnam's military strength during the war, and were further supplemented by Republic of Vietnam National Police. These Territorial Forces were referred to as the Regional and Popular Forces. U.S. service members called them "Ruff Puffs" for short. Territorial Forces were static in organization and specifically tasked with protecting South Vietnam's diffuse population. At their height, Regional Forces possessed 312,000 personnel while Popular Forces possessed 220,800. The Regional Forces acted as a National Guard and protected South Vietnam's government infrastructure and installations, while the Popular Forces served as the local militia. Popular Force teams lived and worked among the villages they defended. Theoretically, working as a part of the Strategic Hamlet program, a Popular Force unit could call upon the Regional Forces for rapid response in the event of attack. The Territorial Forces were to be South Vietnam's own pacification force.

Early in the war, the Territorial Forces were limited in their effectiveness. Neither the U.S. nor South Vietnam placed emphasis on training or equipping them. In fact, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam regulars viewed them with contempt. Nevertheless, Territorial Forces disproportionately accounted for roughly 30 percent of the Viet Cong casualties inflicted throughout the war. They also endured far greater casualties than their Army of the Republic of Vietnam counterparts. The Viet Cong required access to the local population for their own survival, and the Territorial Forces were their most immediate barrier. Though Viet Cong units tended to operate in smaller numbers, they also proved capable of quickly forming larger military units and overwhelming their Regional and Popular Force counterparts. This often necessitated direct intervention by Army of the Republic of Vietnam or U.S. Army forces.

As the U.S. military deescalated its presence in Vietnam, Regional and Popular Forces took on a greater role in "Vietnamization," the U.S. program to expand, equip, and train South Vietnamese forces to take over the U.S. military's role in the war. With the start of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support program in 1967, the number of personnel in the Territorial Forces grew dramatically over the next four years, and South Vietnam's pacification efforts improved markedly. Yet their improvements coincided with the North Vietnamese Army's growing presence in the South. Static and lightly equipped, the Territorial Forces were no match for their North Vietnamese Army counterparts.

U.S. MILITARY UNITS ARRIVE

The South Vietnamese government's inefficiency and corruption in the face of the Viet Cong insurgency pushed the South's political and military leadership to a critical juncture by November of 1963. Rising instability in the South led a few South Vietnamese generals and certain U.S. military and political officials to believe the war was turning against them. In response,

the South Vietnamese generals quietly notified U.S. officials they were planning a coup. In November of 1963, the U.S. government stood aside as these generals deposed President Ngo Din Diem. Events quickly unfolded from there and hardliners executed President Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu.

The war in Vietnam required a firm and steady hand, and the coup failed to bring one about. From November of 1963 to June of 1965, South Vietnam experienced seven regime changes and with them, further political and military deterioration. The situation spiraled so significantly that Senator Mike Mansfield remarked in the summer of 1965, "We are no longer dealing with anyone [in Saigon] who represents anybody in a political sense. We are simply acting to prevent a collapse of the Vietnamese military forces which we pay for and supply." By the time Army Republic of Vietnam General Nguyen Van Thieu assumed leadership in 1965, South Vietnam's dire situation necessitated direct U.S. military intervention.



To win the support of the South Vietnamese people and grow South Vietnam's government, U.S., South Vietnam, and allied forces engaged in civic action projects to improve the lives of civilians. Here they are seen administering medicine to a South Vietnamese child. (Courtesy of the National Archives)



COUNTERINSURGENCY IN THE VIETNAM WAR

PART 3 OF 4



A U.S. Soldier looks on while a hut used to store grain and rice by the Viet Cong is burned. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

It was not enough merely to contain the big units. They had to be pounded with artillery and bombs and eventually brought to battle on the ground if they were not forever to remain a threat.

— General Westmoreland

When writing after the war, Westmoreland often used analogies. He likened the Viet Cong to “termites” who were “eating away” at the “structure of the South Vietnamese government. Some distance away,” he said, “hid the main forces, or big units.” These were the “bully boys,” who were “armed with crowbars and waiting for the propitious moment to move in and destroy the weakened” South Vietnamese state. To Westmoreland, the Viet Cong were a threat; the North Vietnamese Army were the bigger threat. He eagerly welcomed the opportunity to destroy the North Vietnamese Army’s larger military units. The U.S. military sought battle against them.



Though Vietnamization took on greater emphasis later in the war, U.S. service members worked closely with the South Vietnamese throughout. Here, Americans and South Vietnamese patrol an area near Truoi Bridge south of Phu Bai as a combined unit. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

The U.S. Navy and Air Force bombed, blockaded, deployed sensors, and even eventually mined harbors later in the war to slow infiltration and isolate the South from the North. Meanwhile, the Army, the Marines, South Vietnam’s military, and its allies worked to destroy North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units inside South Vietnam.

NAVY

Under Operation MARKETTIME, the U.S. Navy crafted a three-pronged patrol system consisting of outer and inner ship blockades supported by aircraft to block the North from the South’s waterways. The outer ship barrier operated within forty miles of the entirety of the South Vietnamese coast. The inner ship barrier worked the shallow waters along the South Vietnamese coastline. From there, U.S. Navy fast patrol craft, or Swift Boats, and U.S. Coast Guard 82-foot patrol boats rapidly maneuvered in search of illegal Viet Cong activity.

In the interior of Vietnam, as part of Operation GAME WARDEN, the Navy deployed an improvised brown water navy of fiberglass patrol boats and fire-support “monitors” to deny use of the South Vietnamese waterways to North

Vietnam and the Viet Cong. The Navy also deployed landing craft capable of transporting a full U.S. Army platoon to search for nearby Viet Cong troops and supply caches.

Naval aviation launched targeted strikes in Cambodia, Laos, North and South Vietnam. Where possible, naval ship guns acted as waterborne artillery, providing fire support to ground operations near the coast.

AIR FORCE

Beginning in March 1965, the U.S. unleashed its Air Force on Vietnam as part of Operation ROLLING THUNDER. The U.S. hoped the bombing campaign would persuade the North to end its support for the insurgency. In total, the U.S. flew more than 700,000 missions over North Vietnam. The Air Force claimed nearly 500,000 of those missions; the U.S. Navy and Marines flew the remainder. ROLLING THUNDER ended in October 1968. In total, U.S. aircraft dropped more than 600,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnam.

Following ROLLING THUNDER, the U.S. launched Operation COMMANDO HUNT. From November 1968 to April 1972, aircraft dropped nearly 3 million tons of bombs in Laos on infiltration routes and supply depots.

In addition to the role it played in isolating the battlefield, the Air Force also supported ground operations in South Vietnam. The service’s B-52 Stratofortresses dropped some 4 million tons of bombs on suspected Communist base camps, troop concentrations, and supply lines. The Air Force also dropped leaflets on known Communist pooling locations to encourage defection. As part of Operation RANCH HAND, the Air Force sprayed defoliants to kill vegetation and remove cover for Communist ambushes.

MARINES

The Marines’ area of operation at the northern-most portion of South Vietnam placed them in the direct path of North Vietnamese units crossing the Demilitarized Zone. In response, the Marines constructed bases at Phu Bai and Dong Ha to support combat operations parallel to the Demilitarized Zone, and fought North Vietnamese Army regulars at Thon Khe Tri, Con Thien, Gio Linh, Cam Lo, Khe Sanh, and elsewhere.

In addition to fighting against the North Vietnamese Army, the Marines also conducted pacification operations. The struggle, according to Marine Corps General Lewis Walt, was “in and among the people, not passing through, but living among them.” This pressed the Marines into two wars: a war against North Vietnamese Army regulars and a war of pacification. Throughout the war, the North Vietnamese Army threat forced the Marines to divert resources away from their pacification programs.

The Marines used Combined Action Platoons in their counterinsurgency operations. Each platoon consisted of one Marine rifle squad and one Navy corpsman working alongside one platoon of South Vietnamese Territorial Force soldiers. These units worked to build small networks of connected villages by aggressively patrolling and aiding locals with civic and health projects. As the U.S. pressed forward with Vietnamization and the Marine



Clouds of smoke stream from a string of 750 pound bombs dropped by U.S. Air Force B-52 bombers. A line of craters from previous bombing attacks can be seen to the left of the explosions. Many experts argued the firepower was excessive. They believed indiscriminate and massed bombing against insurgents was the equivalent of “using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.” (Courtesy of the National Archives)

presence in Vietnam decreased, the program changed to Combined Action Groups, which brought together a Marine company and a combined Regional Force/Popular Force battalion.

ARMY

When the Army deployed to Vietnam, it had just completed a service-wide reorganization to upgrade firepower and speed at the small unit level. At the small unit level, the service upgraded its mortars, machine guns, and standard-issue assault rifle. To transport these Soldiers, the Army began fully incorporating its newly acquired “Huey” troop-carrying helicopters throughout the service. It further supported these Soldiers with far-ranging artillery situated on mountains and hilltops in “firebases.” To provide its Soldiers with direct fire support, the service added machine guns, grenade launchers, and rocket pods to its helicopters, which the Army called “gunships.”



The U.S. military aggressively searched South Vietnam for large military units. Troops from an Armored Cavalry Regiment enter the jungle on a search and clear operation. The size and noise of U.S. units often gave them away to their North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong opponents. The communists frequently dictated the terms of battle. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

The Army envisioned a conventional war with the Soviet Union in Europe, but instead found itself engaged in a quasi-conventional conflict at the small unit level in Southeast Asia. Here, the service predominantly relied upon its captains and lieutenants who commanded companies and led platoons, respectively. These units conducted search and destroy missions, whose job it was to find the enemy, fix them in place, and finish them. Once the battle was completed, the Army tallied body counts to report the number of Communists killed. Then, the Soldiers abandoned the freshly captured ground in the search of North Vietnamese or Viet Cong elsewhere. The practice earned Westmoreland the unpleasant nickname “Wastmoreland.” Though the U.S. Army gradually embraced less destructive counterinsurgency methodologies as the Vietnam War progressed, throughout much of the conflict, it engaged in a bloody war of attrition.

CONCLUSION

War planners believed that South Vietnam’s insurgency was wholly dependent upon North Vietnam for survival. If the U.S. were able to interdict and eliminate North Vietnam’s access South Vietnam, then the North Vietnamese Army would cease to be a threat. Moreover, cut off from its principal supplier, the Viet Cong would wither on the vine and die. With these two military threats removed from South Vietnam, the state would flourish. Yet the combined might of the U.S., South Vietnam, and its allies were unable to neither stop North Vietnamese incursion, nor completely destroy the North Vietnamese Army or the Viet Cong.

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COUNTERINSURGENCY IN THE VIETNAM WAR

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The First and Second Indochina War are captured in a single image. A wounded ARVN Soldier lies at the feet of ARVN Air Force troops near the center of an old French Cemetery on the southwestern perimeter of Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base. Following U.S. withdrawal and Vietnam's consolidation into a single state, Vietnam engaged in intermittent wars with its neighbors in Laos, Cambodia, and China from 1975 to 1991. This became known as the Third Indochina War. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

We often say how impressive power is. But I do not find it impressive at all. The guns and the bombs, the rockets and the warships, are all symbols of human failure. They are necessary symbols. They protect what we cherish. But they are witness to human folly. A dam built across a great river is impressive. Electrification of the countryside A rich harvest in a hungry land is impressive. The sight of healthy children in a classroom is impressive. These—not mighty arms—are the achievements which the American Nation believes to be impressive. And, if we are steadfast, the time may come when all other nations will also find it so.

— President Lyndon Johnson

In the half-century since the North Vietnamese Army's capture of Saigon on April 30th, 1975, marking the Vietnam War's end, the conflict's divisiveness remains evident to this day; scholars disagree on the primary root cause(s) of failure. Nevertheless, most historians' questions have centered on one or more of the three interconnected but poorly coordinated aims: the war against the Viet Cong, the war against the North Vietnamese Army, and state-building in South Vietnam.

THE WAR AGAINST THE VIET CONG

The U.S., South Vietnam, and its allies failed to destroy the Viet Cong fast enough to eliminate their threat. The Communist insurgents lived among the people and frequently engaged and disengaged from combat at will. Their familiarity with the terrain and their grip over the local population allowed them to control their losses. For its part, South Vietnam failed to extend its political and military control over the population to root out the Viet Cong.

The insurgents' substantial presence was put on worldwide display during the Tet holiday in 1968 when the North Vietnamese commanded the Viet Cong to rise up and engage in conventional combat across South Vietnam. In a few short weeks, U.S., South Vietnam, and allied forces inflicted more than 50,000 casualties, effectively ending the Viet Cong as a fighting force. Yet the Viet Cong's destruction owed less to efforts to root them out than to their own strategic error. Their surprise attack during the Tet holiday demonstrated to the world just how little progress the U.S., South Vietnam, and its allies had made in neutralizing the insurgency and expanding South Vietnamese government control. Subsequently, U.S. home front support for the war waned.

THE WAR AGAINST NORTH VIETNAM

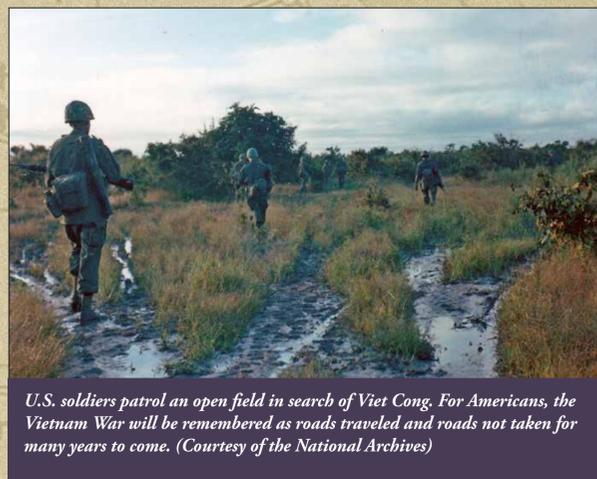
The U.S., South Vietnam, and its allies failed to eliminate the North Vietnamese threat. U.S. military units actively sought to find and destroy the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong and isolate the North from the South. Using helicopters to exponentially increase mobility, the U.S. Army relentlessly sought battle with North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units. Meanwhile, the U.S. Navy and Air Force actively tried to isolate North Vietnam from South Vietnam by bombing targets of military value in the North and infiltration routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and Cambodia. The Air Force deployed sensors along the demilitarized

zone and Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Navy enacted a ship blockade along South Vietnam's coast.

Yet none of these efforts isolated South Vietnam from the North, nor did it bleed North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong quick enough to neutralize their threat. The North Vietnamese Army and insurgent forces reconstituted themselves as quickly as they were destroyed, infiltration into South Vietnam continued unabated (and even increased as the war wound on), and North Vietnam maintained few war-making industrial facilities worth targeting—most of its weaponry was acquired from the Soviet Union and China.

STATE-BUILDING IN SOUTH VIETNAM

South Vietnam failed to transform into a viable state. This was not for lack of resources. Between 1954 and 1960, the U.S. poured \$1.5 billion dollars to pay for state-building in Vietnam—today that number would equal more than \$13 billion. Historian James Carter noted these efforts “consisted of installing a president; building a civil service and training bureaucrats around him; creating a domestic economy, currency, and an industrial base; building ports and airfields, hospitals, and schools; dredging canals



U.S. soldiers patrol an open field in search of Viet Cong. For Americans, the Vietnam War will be remembered as roads traveled and roads not taken for many years to come. (Courtesy of the National Archives)



South Vietnamese ships are docked at the Mariana Islands in Guam while Vietnamese aircraft are parked on the pier. Building the South Vietnamese state required significant economic and logistical means to deliver goods to market. (Courtesy of the National Archives)



Vietnamization in action. LTC Phan Phouc of the 5th Regional Forces addresses the assembled troops during a transition ceremony. His unit took over Fire Support Base “Tomahawk” from the U.S. 101st Airborne Division. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

and harbors to create a transportation grid; constructing an elaborate network of modern roadways; establishing a telecommunications system; and training, equipping, and funding a national police force and a military, among others.” Even if these tasks were performed in a peacetime setting by efficient, ethical, and principled leaders, the challenges would have been monumental. Yet this effort was primarily led by corrupt, inefficient, and authoritarian leaders who, in addition to engaging in internal political strife, had also to contend with the North Vietnamese Army and a growing insurgency.

Throughout the war the U.S. acted as South Vietnam's principal benefactor. The situation was not unlike an infant to its mother; without U.S. support, the South would never survive. South Vietnam endured so long as the U.S. supplied military, logistical, and financial aid. When the U.S. withdrew the bulk of its military forces and significantly reduced financial aid, North Vietnam attacked with overwhelming conventional firepower. The United States did not come to South Vietnam's aid. Its fate was sealed.

THE LEGACIES OF VIETNAM'S PARADOX

U.S. history is rife with insurgent and counterinsurgent warfare. The nation was founded on a successful war of exhaustion to destroy Great Britain's power over the colonies. In the 19th century, the U.S. sought to pacify Indian tribes and expand U.S. sovereignty to the West Coast. Once U.S. influence moved beyond its continental borders, the nation waged a counterinsurgent war in the Philippines, where U.S. commercial interests led the military to conduct pacification missions against the First Philippine Republic. Yet, for all of the U.S.'s experience with counterinsurgent warfare, it was the long and frustrating conflict in Vietnam that burned itself into the nation's collective memory. Words and phrases such as “search and destroy,” “winning hearts and minds,” and “pacification” still echo to this day.

So goes the maxim: “History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” The U.S. is again enmeshed in long wars in similar circumstances to South Vietnam. Just as then, the nation must reconcile the challenge of aligning the defense of vulnerable foreign nations with U.S. policy aims, while at the same time eliminating internal and external threats to those nations and U.S. forces. Counterinsurgency's paradox of creation and destruction will continue to test current and future American generations. As with the Vietnam War, it will provide no easy answers.



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