

The Search for the “Breaking Point” in Vietnam

The Statistics of a Deadly Quarrel

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American strategies for success in the Vietnam War, derived at least partly from historical experience, were based on the assumption that Communist forces would reach a “breaking point” after suffering enough punishment. In conformity with this strategy, extensive damage was inflicted to the point where it appears the military costs accepted by the Communists, in comparison with population, were virtually unprecedented in modern history. The central question about the war then is: Why were the Vietnamese Communists willing to accept virtually unprecedented losses for a military goal that was far from central to the continued existence of their state? Some aspects of an answer to this question are suggested; the strategy of attrition is assessed in historical comparison; and the question of where the “breaking point” might have been is discussed.

I personally underestimated the resistance and the determination of the North Vietnamese. They've taken over 700,000 killed which in relation to population is almost the equivalent of—what? Ten million Americans? And they continue to come. I thought that when we had established a position in Vietnam which would be clearly impossible for them to overrun militarily that then the chances were very high that they would pull back—maybe only for a time—but pull back or take part in some serious negotiation.

—*Dean Rusk, NBC-TV interview, July 2, 1971*

In reflecting on America's involvement in the Vietnam war, commentators have often expressed amazement that bright, talented leaders could embark on a policy that proved so disastrous. How could such a massive mistake have been made? To explain the phenomenon, aspects of the decision makers' personalities are often puzzled over, or inadequacies of the bureaucratic decision-making mechanism are

probed (Thomson, 1968; Ellsberg, 1972; Gallucci, 1971; Halberstam, 1972; Janis, 1972). The content of the decisions is often given little consideration. The decisions are assumed invalid because the policy failed, and so hindsight is used to prejudge them.

This article seeks to examine in context the strategic assumptions behind the decisions that led to U.S. involvement in Vietnam—particularly those decisions that led to the major American escalation of 1965. It examines the strategies for success in Vietnam and concentrates on their underlying assumption: that there was some level of punishment at which the Vietnamese Communists would “break.”

The article then attempts to estimate the costs borne by the Communists and compares this with the cost typical of international wars in the last century and a half. It is found that, although they were fighting for a goal that was far from central to their continued existence as a nation, *the military costs accepted by the Communists in Vietnam were virtually unprecedented historically*. This suggests that U.S. decision makers were on sound historical ground when they fashioned their strategies for success—they were mistaken, but the mistake was a reasonable one. I conclude with a discussion of the extraordinary ability of the Communists in Vietnam to accept slaughter and maintain morale without “breaking” and with some considerations about where their “breaking point” might have been.

The Consensus of 1965

In 1965 U.S. decision makers confronted a deteriorating situation in Vietnam, a situation that seemed to be leading to an imminent Communist victory (see Lewy, 1978: 43-48). It seemed that only American intervention could prevent a Communist victory, and there was near-consensus that saw the prevention of Communist success in South Vietnam as vital to U.S. interests. There was an eloquent dissenter to this proposition within the administration—Undersecretary of State George Ball—but generally there was broad agreement with reporter David Halberstam’s assessment at the time: “Vietnam is a legitimate part of [America’s] global commitment. A strategic country in a key area, it is perhaps one of only five or six nations in the world that is truly vital to U.S. interests” (1965: 319).

The origin of this consensus, rooted in the Cold War policy of containment, is not the subject of this article.¹ Rather, the question to be

considered concerns the American strategies for success in Vietnam. Given that the prevention of Communist victory in Vietnam was seen to be vital to U.S. interests at the time, did the United States have any reasonable hope of military success in Vietnam? And, if so, why did the United States fail?

The "Breaking Point" Assumption

As former Secretary of State Dean Rusk suggests in the earlier quotation, American strategies for success in Vietnam were based on the central assumption that if the Communists sustained enough military punishment they would finally relent, forsaking (at least temporarily) their war effort. It was hoped there was some "breaking point" for the North Vietnamese—some level of punishment at which their morale and resolve would crumble, at which their "will" would be "broken."

In part, this assumption was based on the observation that U.S. goals in Vietnam were somewhat limited. The enemy the United States was opposing in Vietnam was seeking to unify the country under Communist leadership, and American goals were simply to prevent this unification-by-force. The United States was not seeking to overthrow the regime in the Communist north, but only to prevent the extension of its control to the non-Communist south (see Goodman, 1978: 37). In this view the North Vietnamese regime was not fighting for the survival of its state (as were the Germans and Japanese in 1945, for example). They merely had to give up the fight in the south and they would be permitted to retreat to an independent existence in the north.

Accordingly, from the American perspective, the war did not seem to be any sort of "death struggle," as World War II had been. Rather, it was simply a matter of convincing the north that the war in the south was not worth the cost. Sufficiently punished, the Communists could reasonably be expected to relent, at least temporarily, in their effort to extend their area of control.

The American ability to inflict punishment was clear; what was unclear was how much punishment the Communists would take before they would break. Gelb and Betts characterize the thinking this way:

1. For an extended discussion of the origins and development of this consensus, see Gelb and Betts (1979), especially chapter 6. For a discussion of factors in and outside of Vietnam that caused this consensus to change between 1965 and 1968, see Mueller (forthcoming).

"How could a tiny, backward Asian country *not* have a breaking point when opposed by the might of the United States?" (1979: 343).

Strategies for Success

Expectations of U.S. success in Vietnam varied. There were apparently some in the administration who were fairly confident of early victory once American might was properly applied,² while others feared a long war with no guarantee of early success (see Janis, 1972: 108-112; Gelb and Betts, 1979: 126, 318-322; Ellsberg, 1972). Some more or less specific predictions in mid-1965 included General William Westmoreland's timetable that seemed to suggest a reasonable hope for the defeat and destruction of enemy forces by the end of 1967 and Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton's calculation of a fifty-fifty chance of success by 1968 (Pentagon Papers, 1971: Vol. 3, 482, 484).³ Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, writing at the end of 1965, saw a fifty-fifty chance of success by early 1967 (Pentagon Papers, 1971: Vol. 4, 624).

However, as suggested above, success, whatever the degree of confidence, was based on the assumption that a point would be reached where, as Westmoreland wrote in 1965, the enemy would become "convinced that military victory was impossible and then would not be willing to endure further punishment" (Pentagon Papers, 1971: Vol. 3, 482). Or, as he put it in 1967, "We'll just go on bleeding them until Hanoi wakes up to the fact that they have bled their country to the point of national disaster for generations. Then they will have to reassess their position" (Lewy, 1978: 73).

There were at least three ways the war might have been successful for the United States. All had historical precedents.

(1) One of these was the "fade away" thesis. Walt Rostow, then Chairman of the State Department's Policy Planning Council, was one who suggested in 1965 that, if all possible routes to victory were denied, the enemy might finally give up "in discouragement," somewhat in the manner of guerrilla defeats in Greece (1946-1949), the Philippines (1945-

2. As Moyers put it, "There was a confidence—it was never bragged about, it was just there—a residue perhaps of the confrontation of missiles over Cuba—that when the chips were really down, the other people would fold" (1969: 262). See also Lewy (1978: 30, 41, 164) and Goodman (1978: 2).

3. Westmoreland argues that this common reading of his 1965 timetable is inaccurate (1976: 142-143).

1954), and Malaya (1948-1960) [Pentagon Papers, 1971: Vol. 3, 381-382].⁴ Indeed, one could add other examples to this list. Active Communist or Communist-supported guerrilla movements had been successfully undercut by non-Communist forces in Guatemala, Venezuela, and the Congo in the early and mid-1960s.

The CIA assessment accepted by McNamara in 1965 argued that if the Communists see "no prospect of an early victory and no grounds for hope they can simply outlast the U.S." and if North Vietnam is under "damaging punitive attack," then "Hanoi probably would, at least for a period of time, alter its basic strategy and course of action in South Vietnam" (Pentagon Papers, 1971: Vol. 4, 26).⁵

The war, as Westmoreland saw it, was one of "attrition" against "an enemy with limited manpower." "Although the North Vietnamese might constantly rebuild their units," Westmoreland has argued, "they did so each time with manpower less adequately trained" (1976: 153).⁶ Thus depleted, they would fade away; in McNamara's words, they "would choose to reduce their efforts in the South and try to salvage their resources for another day" (Pentagon Papers, 1971: Vol. 4, 624).

(2) Another path to success in Vietnam might be through a combination of military effectiveness and diplomatic prowess. Denied victory, the enemy might seek a negotiated settlement, one which would "save the Communists' face without giving them South Vietnam," as Gelb put it (1971: 152). Although neither Gelb nor Rostow see many precedents for this, the Korean War provides an example of a Communist military effort which was thwarted and which led to a negotiated agreement to return to prewar boundaries.

In addition, the Vietnamese Communists had been willing in 1954 to accept a compromise settlement in Indochina rather than continue the war. There had been two or three negotiated settlements in Laos in which various sorts of compromise partitions were worked out with the Communists. To be sure, these agreements in Indochina were often arrangements to provide a face-saving way for western powers to

4. Roger Hilsman wrote in 1964: "The alacrity with which the Communists fell into line after we introduced troops into Thailand following the fall of Nam Tha illustrates the effectiveness of such moves" (quoted in Gelb and Betts, 1979: 149n).

5. The existence of this CIA conclusion in 1965 runs counter to the argument that intelligence reports of the time were "invariably pessimistic" (Janis, 1972: 111). See also Epstein (1975: 95-100).

6. See also his comments in Thompson and Frizzell (1977: 66). Some military leaders apparently felt the North Vietnamese supply of fighting-age men could be severely depleted, a calculation Defense Department analysts found to be physically impossible. See Lewy (1978: 82-84), Enthoven and Smith (1971: 295-300), Jenkins (1970), and Thayer (1977: 85-92).

withdraw. However, they give evidence of the willingness of Indochinese Communists to accept partitions and at least temporary cease-fires rather than continuing to pursue a costly war. It seemed possible to many that the North Vietnamese would come to their senses after enough battering by the American military machine and seek a reasoned agreement.

(3) A related hope was that a costly war might lead to discouragement on the part of important North Vietnamese allies—the Soviets in particular (for example, see Pentagon Papers, 1971: Vol. 3, 215). As the war escalated and as North Vietnamese dependence on outside aid increased, the outsiders would have more leverage on Hanoi's policy. It could be hoped the Soviets, wooed by the benefits of the policy of detente and already wary of the costs and escalatory dangers of such "wars of national liberation," might be successful in urging their little client into a more moderate stance. When the Yugoslavs cut off outside aid and sanctuary to the Communists in the Greek civil war, the war collapsed—a comforting, if rather ill-fitting, precedent. It could also be pointed out that the Soviets and Chinese apparently had been a moderating influence on the Vietnamese Communists in the negotiation that concluded the Indochina War in 1954. As Bill Moyers put it, "The President—well, most of us shared this at the White House—we felt that he could reason with the Russians and they would deliver" (1969: 270).

American policy makers, then, did have some hope for success in Vietnam. However, these hopes required that the United States would be able to inflict unrelenting punishment on the North Vietnamese, causing their will to be broken. One pushed on, hoping for signs of cracking morale among Communist troops, of defeatism, of shifts to more moderate leadership in Hanoi (as happened in Moscow following the death of Stalin in 1953 and preceding the end of the Korean War), of signs that the Soviets would become cooperative.⁷

7. For specialist Douglas Pike's quest for signs of weakening of will in North Vietnam, see *New York Times*, January 8, 1971. For William Bundy's hoped-for signs that Hanoi might become "discouraged," see Gelb and Betts (1979: 302). For McNamara's growing pessimism on the issue, see Lewy (1978: 77, 384). For the hope in 1969 that Ho Chi Minh's death would usher in more moderate leaders, see Goodman (1978: 102). For the suggestion that "Soviet pressure" had some moderating impact in Hanoi, see Zagoria (1967: 121). For U.S. hopes of Soviet help, see Gelb and Betts (1979: 188) and Goodman (1978: 119-121). There were continual efforts to detect division within the North Vietnamese leadership (Goodman, 1978: 289), but none was ever found (Gelb and Betts, 1979: 332). In a book written after the war, Palmer argues that Communist field commander Nguyen Chi Thanh saw "the futility of continued confrontation with American firepower" in 1966 and protested "vehemently" (1978: 120). However, Palmer seems to be taking a debate over tactics and making it into one over goals; see McGarvey (1969: 7).

It was a strategy that failed, but it was not one that could realistically be discarded at the time. Halberstam, writing at the end of 1967, was pessimistic about the chances of American success in Vietnam; yet, he had to admit that he and other critics might be proved wrong. Perhaps, he said, a victory was possible: "You simply grind out a terribly punishing war, year after year, using that immense American firepower, crushing the enemy and a good deal of the population, until finally there has been so much death and destruction that the enemy will stumble out of the forest, as stunned and numb as the rest of the Vietnamese people" (1967: 58).

Communist Losses in Vietnam— The "Body Count"

That American and South Vietnamese forces, in conformity with the strategy, were generally successful in inflicting extensive destruction on Communist forces seems undeniable. Estimating the extent of these Communist losses, however, is somewhat complicated. Official statistics for battle deaths in the war are given in Table 1. The figures cover 1965 to 1974 and thus do not include Communist and South Vietnamese losses in the final Communist offensive of 1975.

The figure for Communist battle deaths is, of course, an estimate based in part on the notorious "body count," one of the statistics introduced in Vietnam to get some measure of progress in the war. It is generally assumed that the body count was exaggerated: There was considerable incentive for U.S. and South Vietnamese officers to err on the high side or even to fabricate wildly to impress superiors. It was doubtless common for bodies to be counted twice or for civilian deaths to be included in the body count (Lewy, 1978: 78-82; Kinnard, 1977: 73-75; King, 1972; Mylander, 1974: 80-82). There were errors in the other direction as well. The enemy commonly made great efforts to hide its dead (Lewy, 1978: 54; Leites, 1969: ix, 155), and many deaths from artillery and air strikes were unknown.⁸

Among the defenders of the body count was Lt. General Julian J. Ewell, who greatly stressed it (Kinnard, 1977: 73-74; Lewy, 1978: 142).

8. Lewy quotes a message from the U.S. embassy: "How do you learn whether anyone was inside structures and sampans destroyed by the hundreds every day by air strikes, artillery fire, and naval gunfire" (1978: 443)? See also Westmoreland (1976: 273).

TABLE 1
Total Military Deaths in Vietnam
1965-1974

	<i>Killed</i>
United States	46,498
South Vietnam	220,357
Communists	950,765

SOURCE: Department of Defense, in Lewy (1978: 450-451).

Westmoreland claimed he directed "several detailed studies which determined as well as anybody could that the count probably erred on the side of caution" (1976: 273). One of these was apparently the study which searched 70 captured enemy documents and confirmed the 1966 body count to within 1.8 percent. However, according to Alain Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, a review by the Defense Department's Systems Analysis Office of the same documents "suggested that the enemy body count was overstated by at least 30 percent" (1971: 290).

In September 1974, after the American withdrawal but before the final South Vietnamese debacle, a former officer in the war, Douglas Kinnard, sent a questionnaire to the 173 Army General Officers who had held command positions in the war. Two-thirds responded; their answer to a question Kinnard asked about the body count is given in Table 2. There are problems in making use of isolated questions from surveys, but it certainly seems fair to conclude that there would be little agreement with Westmoreland's assertion that the body count was an underestimate. The wording on the other two options is unfortunate: It would seem entirely possible for someone to believe *both* that the body count was "within reason accurate" *and* "often inflated." The vagueness of the word "often" gives little clue as to *how* inflated the respondent felt the body count to be. Indeed, it seems rather impressive that 26% found the body count to be reasonably accurate, given the possible mild interpretation of the other alternative.

Nonetheless, the available evidence suggests that the 1974 figure of 950,765 Communist battle deaths is likely to be a considerable overestimation. How much lower should it be?

To approach an estimate, one might look at the other figures in Table 1. According to these, some 267,000 battle deaths occurred among U.S. and South Vietnamese troops. The American figures can be taken as accurate (the figure would be some 10,000 higher if deaths not directly

TABLE 2
Questionnaire of Army General Officers, 1974
(in percentages)

Was body count	
(1) within reason accurate?	26
(2) underestimated even considering the amount added by MACV to account for later deaths of wounded, etc.?	3
(3) often inflated?	61
(4) other or no answer.	10
	<hr/> 100

SOURCE: Kinnard (1977: 172).

linked to the battlefield in Vietnam are included.) The South Vietnamese, who were often fanciful in estimating enemy losses, seem generally to be reasonably accurate with their own losses—the suspicion, in fact, is that there was underreporting of their own losses so that commanders could draw pay for the “ghosts” (Starnes, 1974: 17). Also, the figures in Table 1 do not include South Vietnamese battle deaths for the 1975 period. It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that combined U.S. and South Vietnamese battle deaths in the war came to well over one-quarter million.

While Communist military deaths may never have reached the figure of nearly 1,000,000 estimated by the United States, it seems likely that Communist losses in the war were higher—considerably higher—than the combined U.S.-South Vietnamese losses. The American military machine was specifically designed to maximize enemy losses while minimizing American losses, even if the imbalance could be achieved only at enormous monetary cost. Furthermore, even if one assumes that casualties in most ordinary battles averaged out to near-standoffs, the Communists were willing at several points to launch major offensives in which, by all accounts, they suffered enormously: The Tet offensive of 1968 and the Easter offensive of 1972, for example, clearly cost the Communists tens of thousands of lives.⁹

9. After some initial exaggeration, the Communist battle deaths in the Tet offensive were put at 30,000 (Mildren, 1968: 87). The Communist death toll in the 1972 offensive was estimated at between 50,000 and 75,000 (Kinnard, 1977: 150) or close to 100,000 (Lewy, 1978: 198).

To this, one must add Communist losses due to long-range bombing and artillery. According to Westmoreland, often these were not included in the casualty figures (1976: 273). The Communists probably suffered considerable losses due to illness and primitive medical care: On the several-month march to the south alone, from 10% to 20% of the men infiltrating reportedly died, largely from malaria (Van Dyke, 1972: 41).

Communist estimates of their own losses are scarce, but one estimate comes from an interview with General Vo Nguyen Giap conducted by Oriana Fallaci in the spring of 1969:

“General, the Americans say you’ve lost half a million men.”

“That’s quite exact.”

He let his head drop as casually as if it were quite unimportant, as hurriedly as if, perhaps, the real figure were even larger.¹⁰

It is possible there is a certain amount of perverse bravura in Giap’s admission. He may have wanted to convey a casualness about heavy losses to suggest to the Americans that he was willing to pursue the war indefinitely, without regard to costs. (If so, it was a mistake; American military leaders picked up the statement and used it to try to prove the enemy was “hurting.”) But Giap was not inept at statistics. His lengthy speeches contain many quantitative analyses, reminding one at times of Robert McNamara (whom he frequently quotes; see McGarvey, 1969: 168-251). Some of his statistics have to be dealt with carefully—he was quick to claim that thousands of American aircraft had been shot down over the north when the United States put the number in the hundreds, a difference largely due, it seems, to the North Vietnamese inclusion of unmanned drones in their tally as well as the well-known phenomenon of double-counting a downed plane by widely separated observers (Van Dyke, 1972: 248; Salisbury, 1967: 140). In general, it would seem unwise to assume Giap’s 1969 estimate of his own losses was either wildly uninformed or purely propagandistic.

Another suggestion of the magnitude of Communist losses comes from a report of a postwar tour of a Communist tunnel system in South Vietnam. The captain leading the tour observed that, of 600 men in his battalion, only four survived the war (New York Times, October 13, 1977).

10. Compare Ho Chi Minh’s statement: “In the end, the Americans will have killed ten of us for every American soldier who died, but it is they who will tire first” (quoted in Rosen, 1972: 168).

It seems, then, that, while one can be skeptical or even contemptuous of the accuracy of the body count, one cannot escape the conclusion that Communist losses in the war were enormous. But if the body count is assumed to be too high, what might be a more accurate estimate? A reasonable, possibly conservative, estimate might be 500,000 to 600,000 men. This applies a discount that is larger than the 30% figure suggested by Enthoven and Smith. It is approximately twice the combined U.S.-South Vietnamese battle deaths, and it is similar to the figure Giap admitted to in 1969, six years before the end of the war.¹¹

Vietnam in Historical Comparison

To compare Vietnam losses with those other in wars, the battle death figure should be calculated as a percentage of the prewar population. A census in North Vietnam in 1960 tallied a population of 15,903,000. The population of South Vietnam at the time is estimated at about 14,000,000 (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1973: Vol. 23, p. 8). If one assumes that a sizable percentage of the residents of South Vietnam were essentially North Vietnamese in loyalty and in political orientation, then they should logically be added to the population of the north—it was from among them, of course, that the Viet Cong was formed, and it was they who bore the brunt of the fighting from 1960 to 1965. Thus, a combined North Vietnamese prewar "population" could reasonably be set at 20,000,000.

With 500,000 or 600,000 battle deaths, then, this would suggest the Communists lost some 2.5-3% of their prewar population in the war in battle deaths.¹²

11. It might be added that the Communists did not decide to stop sacrificing in 1975—the war just happened to end then. Had the Communist offensive failed, as it had in 1972, it is to be presumed the Communists would still have continued the war, increasing their losses even more. Also, the debacle on the South Vietnamese side in 1975 seems to have been something of a surprise to the Communists. They probably were expecting to pay far greater costs in 1975 (see Lewy, 1978: 211-212). Lewy's own estimate of Communist deaths is 444,000, somewhat lower than the one given here (1978: 453). He derives this by applying the 30% discount suggested by Enthoven and Smith and then assuming that one-third of the remaining dead are civilians. But the Enthoven and Smith discount already seems to take into consideration inclusion of civilians in the body count (1971: 295). Thus, Lewy is, to a degree, subtracting civilians twice. However, the basic conclusions of the following sections hold even if one accepts Lewy's lower estimate.

12. If one uses Lewy's somewhat lower estimate of Communist military deaths, this percentage would be about 2.2. See note 11.

How does this compare with other wars? It is almost unprecedented. Building on classic works by Wright (1942), Richardson (1960), and Klingberg (1966), Singer and Small published in 1972 *The Wages of War*. For the entire period of world history since 1816, Singer and Small set up careful criteria and identified 100 international wars. The set of wars includes imperial and colonial wars as well as wars among major states, and it includes all familiar wars as well as a great many that have long been forgotten. Any international war to which the United States sent troops is included.

For each war, Singer and Small estimated, with varying degrees of confidence, the battle deaths suffered by each participating country.¹³ According to these figures, scarcely any of the hundreds of participants in the 100 international wars in the last 160 years have lost as many as 2% of their prewar population in battle deaths. The few cases where battle deaths attained levels higher than 2% of the prewar population mostly occurred in the two world wars in which industrial nations fought with sophisticated machines of destruction for their very existence. In World War II, according to Singer and Small, Germany and the Soviet Union each lost some 4.4% of their prewar populations in battle deaths. In World War I, Germany lost 2.7%, Austria-Hungary, 2.3%; France 3.3%; Rumania, 4.7%; and England, 2.0% (1972: 351-357).¹⁴ The only other war in which losses were as high was the Chaco War of 1932-1935 in which Paraguay lost 5.6% of its prewar population (in winning) and Bolivia lost 3.2%.¹⁵

One should not assume that these numbers are accurate. However, even allowing considerable room for error, the extraordinary cost borne by the Vietnamese Communists seems clear. In the last 160 years only a very few of the hundreds of participants in international wars have paid such a high price in military deaths.

More specific comparisons may also be in order: How do the costs borne by the Vietnamese Communists compare with those borne by the

13. Singer and Small define battle deaths ("battle-connected deaths") as "personnel who were killed in combat" plus "those who subsequently died from combat wounds or from diseases contracted in the war theater" (1972: 49). This definition is probably less restrictive than the count used by U.S. forces in Vietnam.

14. By contrast, the United States lost 0.1% of its prewar population in battle deaths in World War I, 0.3% in World War II.

15. There was also a war from 1865 to 1870 in which Paraguay fought Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. Paraguay may have lost a majority of its population in the war (Klingberg, 1966: 135). This war is excluded from the Singer and Small list for technical reasons: Paraguay's prewar population was too small for it to be considered a significant international entity in their terms.

enemy in the two other Asian wars in which the United States has been involved—the war against Japan and the Korean war? Singer and Small estimate Japanese battle deaths at 1.4% of prewar population. That is, *Communist battle deaths in Vietnam were, as a percentage of the prewar population, probably twice as high as those suffered by the fanatical, often suicidal Japanese in World War II.* Thus, even the Japanese surrendered, giving the fate of their nation over to the mercy of their bitter enemies, well before Japanese battle death proportions reached levels accepted by the North Vietnamese. The Japanese could have continued to fight to defend the home islands in a last “glorious battle,” as urged by some of their generals. But their will to continue the fight had been broken by their losses, and peace feelers had been sent out months before the war was over (and long before the atomic bombs were dropped; see Kecskemeti, 1958).¹⁶ In the Korean war the Communists paid heavily, but in the end battle deaths (Chinese plus North Korean) added to less than two-tenths of one percent of the combined prewar population, according to Singer and Small (1972: 349).¹⁷

Another pertinent comparison would be with the Communist Viet Minh war against French colonialism in Indochina, which lasted from 1945 to 1954. Both sides paid heavily, but losses do not appear to be of the magnitude suffered in the later war. In 1951 the Viet Minh launched three major offensives, all failures, and apparently suffered around 20,000 *casualties*; their battle deaths in the massed battle at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 have been put at 7900 (Jenkins, 1972: 4; Fall, 1967: 487).

These data suggest, then, that American decision makers were on sound historical ground when they hoped and expected that, at some acceptable cost, they could break the “will” of the North Vietnamese. Only occasionally in the last 160 years has a power absorbed battle deaths in an international war in the proportions accepted by the North Vietnamese, and these have chiefly occurred in the murderous totality of the world wars when states were fighting for their survival.

16. If one adds civilian casualties into the consideration, a difference probably still remains. The Japanese, of course, suffered enormously from conventional and atomic bombing in the last months of the war—several hundred thousand deaths. But even a million bombing deaths would still leave total war deaths at less than 3% of the prewar population. The North Vietnamese also suffered heavily from bombing.

17. A war of attrition against a country like China is hardly a conceivable strategy. Looking specifically at the North Koreans, battle deaths rates get very high—perhaps 6% of the prewar population if estimates are accurate. However, the North Koreans lost their war long before costs got this high, and they were saved only by the Chinese entry, which changed the whole nature of the war (see Rees, 1964: 10, 461).

Attrition as a Strategy

One must be careful with these analogies and comparisons. The war in Vietnam was one of attrition, while many of the others were not. For example, the Japanese war was not particularly one of attrition. Surrender was proffered in the face of increasing evidence that invasion would bring physical occupation and defeat.

It has been argued often that the North Vietnamese could only have been defeated by an invasion of North Vietnam itself or, as in the case of Japan, by the credible threat of an invasion (assuming that the invasions did not bring China into the war.) To this, proponents of the attrition theory could make at least three responses.

First, attrition did play a major role in many past wars. While World War I ended only when a western breakthrough made the final defeat of the Central Powers obvious, this breakthrough came after years of brutal attrition had sapped the German will.¹⁸ There are aspects of World War II which are similar, and, surely, the Russian capitulation in 1917 was largely due to the effects of attrition.

Second, unlike, for example, the Germans and the Soviets in World War II, the North Vietnamese were not fighting for the existence of their state in the same direct and obvious sense. While they seemed to fear a U.S. invasion of the north, at least in the early years of the war (Van Dyke, 1972; McGarvey, 1969), no one was confronting them with direct ultimatums of unconditional surrender and postwar domination. The North Vietnamese had viable options to fighting it out: in consonance with U.S. hopes, they could fade out of the war or negotiate their way out and console themselves with the thought that they could always renew it later when conditions were better. The powers in the world wars could end them only by accepting either unconditional surrender or highly punitive peace treaties (as at Versailles and Brest Litovsk). The defeat options before North Vietnam were much milder, and surrender by negotiation or by fading away was a reasonable possibility.

Third, the Korean war shows an instance where the Communists gave up the idea of extending control over a new territory, at losses proportionately lower than those suffered by North Vietnam, even though they possessed the ability to continue the costly war; no invasion of China by U.S. forces was really threatened. The Communists' military goals were frustrated—they were “denied victory”—and they

18. See the comments by Robert Komer and Westmoreland in Thompson and Frizzell (1977: 84, 66).

finally accepted a prewar territorial status quo. Again, one could point out that in 1954 the Communists in Indochina accepted (at least temporarily) something far less than their maximum goals.

Sources of Communist Success in the Vietnam War

The Americans hoped in the war in Vietnam that the Communists, if punished enough and if denied victory, would eventually relent in their war aims. This hope, it has been argued here, was not unreasonable: The lesson from history is that nations almost always end wars long before the losses reach proportions suffered by the Communist side in the war in Vietnam.

The question, then, is not so much how the Americans could have made such a foolish miscalculation, but why the Vietnamese Communists were willing to accept virtually unprecedented losses for the sake of a military goal that was far from central to their survival as a nation. Why didn't morale deteriorate as losses mounted? Why didn't a defeatist faction rise? Why did the population continue to accept the leadership's willingness to send thousands upon thousands of young men to the south to be ground up by the American military machine?

Some would argue that the answer to these questions lies in the peculiar political and military structure of the Vietnam war. It was a war of "will," of "patience," they argue, and the North Vietnamese leadership was constantly encouraged by signs of weakening resolution in the United States. As U.S. costs mounted, as the peace movement grew, and as public support for the war dwindled, it can be argued, the Communists were encouraged to continue their costly struggle.¹⁹ Even military setbacks for them, such as the incredibly costly Tet offensive of 1968, was, in the final analysis, a great political success for the enemy because it increased the unpopularity of the war in the United States and helped enormously to activate the peace movement.

There obviously must be some validity to this argument. One must assume the North Vietnamese found signs of crumbling morale in the United States to be encouraging even as American decision makers found the absence of such signs in North Vietnam to be discouraging.

19. Paul Nitze in Thompson and Frizzell (1977: 6); Goodman (1978: 116). American opinion trends are traced and analyzed in Mueller (1973).

However, it seems that the North Vietnamese would have continued the war even without such encouraging signs. Psychologically they seem to have been committed to endless sacrifice, to a long, protracted war. The North Vietnamese leadership was apparently unwaveringly devoted to this approach from the beginning—the war would be long and costly, but they would prevail. This willingness to accept high costs was certainly found in General Giap by Oriana Fallaci in her 1969 interview with him. She was impressed by “his capacity for hate and pitiless cruelty”; she found him, when roused, “a gesticulating fanatic with crimson cheeks and hatefilled eyes, frightening.” She quotes his poem:

Hit the enemy and run
Lure him into an ambush and kill him
Kill the imperialists with any means that come to hand
Regardless of the risk you may be running.

And his slogan: “Throughout the world, a hundred people die every minute. Life and death don’t matter.”

Giap’s published speeches are impressive in this respect. There is great emphasis on fighting the war with zeal and determination, and troops are urged to inflict casualties mercilessly on the enemy. Nowhere does Giap write about minimizing his own casualties. It seems to be an unimportant part of his military strategy. As McGarvey noted in 1969, Giap “regards any cost in Communist lives as bearable so long as a sufficient number of casualties are inflicted on the enemy and replacements for his troops continue to be available. His is not an army that sends coffins north; it is by the traffic in homebound American coffins that Giap measures his success” (1969: 43). The difference in perceptions is neatly summarized in General Westmoreland’s exasperated remark: “Any American commander who took the same vast losses as General Giap would have been sacked overnight” (1976: 251-252).

The acceptance of a long, costly war is found in numerous statements by North Vietnamese leaders. In 1966 Ho Chi Minh said, “We will fight to find victory. Everything depends on the Americans. If they want to make war for 20 years, then we shall make war for 20 years” (Kellen, 1972: 110; note 12). Pham Van Dong, the North Vietnamese Premier, told New York *Times* reporter Harrison Salisbury in 1966, “we are preparing for a long war. How many years would you say? Ten,

twenty—what do you think about twenty" (1967: 196)? In 1969, Fallaci asked Giap, "How long will this war go on, General? How long will this poor people be called upon to suffer sacrifice and die?" Giap replied, "It will last as long as necessary—10, 15, 20, 50 years. Until as our President Ho says we have won total victory. Yes, even 20, even 50 years. We aren't afraid, and we aren't in a hurry."

But one can expect such statements from a country's leaders, especially in a war of attrition. It was Lyndon Johnson, after all, who said in 1965, "We will remain as long as is necessary with the might that is required, whatever the risk and whatever the cost" (Lewy, 1968: 50-51), or "We will not be defeated. We will not grow tired" (Johnson, 1971: 142). The statements can be accepted as reflections of the state of things, or they can be brushed aside as empty bravura intended to intimidate the enemy. One hardly expects a leader to say, "If we don't win in six months, we're going to quit."

In the case of the Communist leaders in the war in Vietnam, however, it seems clear that the leaders meant it. What makes it so unusual, so extraordinary when compared with other wars of the last century and a half, is that the leadership slogans seem to have been substantially accepted by their troops and population.

After this trip to North Vietnam in 1966, Salisbury observed,

I seldom talked to any North Vietnamese without some reference coming into the conversation of the people's preparedness to fight ten, fifteen, even twenty years in order to achieve victory. At first I thought such expressions might reflect government propaganda . . . but . . . I began to realize that this was a national psychology.

In searching for a "clue to the temperature and morale of North Vietnam," he was constantly reminded of the "do-or-die, no compromise, death-before-dishonor" spirit of the Irish rebellion, or of the nineteenth-century Russian zealots "who casually threw away their lives in one desperate attempt after another to bring down the Russian Empire with a single bomb or a single bullet imprecisely aimed against the Czar or his principal ministers" (1967: 144, 142).²⁰

20. Cameron quotes a North Vietnamese lieutenant-colonel in 1966: "We have already had great losses, and I am afraid we shall have greater yet. The price of all this is horrible. But quite honestly I do not see how we can lose. How long it will take I do not know. I may not see the end myself. But I expect my children will" (1966: 79).

Equally amazed is Kellen, a World War I psychological warfare officer who conducted a number of studies of Communist morale in Vietnam for the Rand Corporation. The studies included extensive interviews with North Vietnamese and Viet Cong prisoners. His summaries of his research are liberally studded with words like "incredible," "extraordinary," "surprising," and "astonishing." Morale, he found, was maintained at a level "not equalled by the Nazi soldiers in World War II or the Chinese soldiers in the Korean War." He speaks of the soldiers' "apparently inexhaustible courage and morale" and of the leadership's ability "to mobilize the human and material resources for the kind of total war Hitler spoke of but never attained." Kellen found the soldiers greatly resilient after military setbacks and possessed of an unshakable faith in final victory even though they were repeatedly told the war would probably be long and fierce (1972: 103-108).²¹

In assessing the remarkable fighting ability of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, Kellen suggests their success comes from a number of sources. They possessed neither fanaticism nor ideological commitment to Communism. Rather, prominent sources of strength included "an astonishing uniform . . . belief in their cause," "a firm belief that they cannot . . . lose the war," and a "deep personal hatred, a true abhorrence of their enemy, the United States," which Kellen finds more unrelieved than the Nazi soldiers' hatred of the Russians in World War II. He also points to an assiduous and apparently generally successful effort through self-criticism sessions to "eradicate fear of death itself" (1972: 104-105).²²

Others who have studied the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong are also impressed (Berman, 1974; Knoebl, 1967; Pike, 1966; Leites, 1969). In Vietnam, it seems, the United States was up against an incredibly well-functioning organization, firmly disciplined, tenaciously led, largely free from corruption or self-indulgence. To an extraordinary degree, the organization was able to enforce upon itself an almost religious devotion to duty, sacrifice, loyalty, and fatalistic patience. Although the Communists often experienced massive military setbacks and times of stress and exhaustion, the organization was always able to refit itself to

21. In a 1967 speech Giap quotes Ho: "The closer we come to victory, the greater the hardships we must endure" (McGarvey, 1969: 238).

22. Westmoreland observes: "Many captive soldiers had tattoos on their bodies bearing the slogan, 'Born in the north to die in the south.' They told of funeral ceremonies in their honor before they left their villages" (1976: 252; see also Leites, 1969: 155-160).

rearm, and to come back for more.²³ It may well be, as one of the generals surveyed by Kinnard put it, "They were in fact the best enemy we have faced in our history" (1977: 67).

Kellen stresses, "So well-grounded seems their morale, and so self-resurrecting, that it is not really possible to see how it can be broken" (1972: 106). Instead, it was the American will that broke. Although the war in Vietnam did not come out the way American strategists hoped, in the final analysis it does represent a triumph, though a costly one, for the strategy of attrition.

Could the War Have Been Won?

In Senate testimony in 1969, General Westmoreland was asked if he thought the war could be won. "Absolutely," he said. "If we had continued to bomb, the war would be over at this time—or would be nearly over. The enemy would have fully realized that he had nothing to gain by continuing the struggle" (Race, 1976: 393). Admiral U.S.G. Sharp was equally confident—the massive bombing of Hanoi at the end of 1972, in fact, finally and for the first time "influenced their *will* to continue the aggression—we had convinced them that it was, in fact, becoming too costly. . . . Unfortunately, we failed to press home our advantage of the moment" (1978: 255; see also Goodman, 1978: 161). Sir Robert Thompson was also impressed by the 1972 bombing, arguing that "after eleven days of those B-52 attacks . . . *you had won the war. It was over!* . . . They and their whole rear base at that point were at your mercy. They would have taken any terms" (Thompson and Frizzell, 1977: 105).²⁴

Others take a longer-term view and one that is more carefully qualified. Lewy suggests that, had the war been fought differently from the beginning—using "surprise and massed strength" at "decisive points," applying careful programs of population security and Vietnamization—the outcome of the war might have been different (1978:

23. This does not mean that the Communists never had morale problems. Indeed, it was one of their chief concerns (see Lewy 1968: 176). In general, they seem to have been particularly successful in bolstering morale when it sagged. Kellen observes that few North Vietnamese and very few cadre were ever taken prisoner; "there have been rather few defectors"; and "there have been no unit surrenders" (1972: 103).

24. This kind of statement does not appear in Thompson's book, *Peace is Not at Hand* (1974).

439-440). Gelb and Betts, somewhat ironically, suggest that "some combination" of these actions might have produced a Communist defeat: "using nuclear weapons, dispatching a million men to fight, removing all sanctuaries and bombing restrictions, running a nearly perfect pacification program, . . . and demanding and receiving . . . fundamental political reforms" (1979: 330).

What such analysts need is convincing evidence that the North Vietnamese "breaking point" had been, or could have been, reached. It seems reasonable to assume there was some level of punishment and defeat at which the Communists would cave in. Indeed, Rosen, in a study of 40 international wars, found that "the party superior in strength but inferior in cost-tolerance (e.g., the United States in Vietnam) is favored, at least by the odds (60/40), to win" (1972: 183). The evidence of this article suggests, however, that the Communists in Vietnam are virtually unique in the history of the last 160 years in their willingness to tolerate casualties. As Colonel Donaldson Frizzell puts it, "Time after time the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces inflicted heavy casualties upon the [Communist] forces. The Communists suffered casualties that decimated their battalions and brigades, literally knocking them out of combat for months." Yet they were willing to take this "terrible punishment and come back for more" (Thompson and Frizzell, 1977: 75).

At no time is there convincing evidence that this punishment was causing the breaking point to be reached. Thompson based his conclusion that the war was won in 1972 on the observations that the North Vietnamese had used up their anti-aircraft missiles in the largely deserted Hanoi area and that the mining of the harbor would make the importation of adequate food supplies difficult. Admiral Sharp cites this evidence as well, and also pointed to the testimony of one American prisoner of war in Hanoi who said the bombing raids caused the prison guards to cower with "ashen" cheeks "in the lee of the walls"; the "enemy's will was broken," the prisoner observed. "You could sense it in every Vietnamese face" (1978: 258).

It is difficult to know how to weigh the importance of the color of a prison guard's cheeks, but even granting that that mining and bombing in 1972 caused severe suffering, disruption, and deprivation in North Vietnam (a conclusion for which there is considerable counterevidence),²⁵

25. American military experts were observing in 1972 that "after some adjustments, the Soviet Union and China could get enough war material and food into North Vietnam by rail to make up for seaborne supplies cut off by the mining of North Vietnamese ports" (New York Times, May 13, 1972). As for the effectiveness of the bombing (using the new "smart" bombs), the lesson of the famous Than Hoa bridge is instructive. The destruction

it does not follow that the breaking point had been reached (see also Lewy, 1978: 415). The suffering had been escalated several times before in the course of this long war, and each time the Communists had been able to dig in and to accommodate. Morale did not crack.

It is more difficult to argue with Lewy's conclusion that the war could have been fought much better or with the Gelb-Betts list of ingredients for a Communist defeat. It is interesting that neither includes an invasion of North Vietnam in their prescription. This means they assume that the Americans and South Vietnamese might have been able to reach the Communist breaking point: Some combination of punishment and continual military defeat would eventually cause the Communists to give up.

It is impossible, of course, to know where the breaking point might be. It is doubtless true, as Henry Kissinger often observed in apparent exasperation, that North Vietnam can not "be the only country in the world without a breaking point" (Goodman, 1978: 96). However, the evidence presented here should cause one take the North Vietnamese seriously when they talk about fighting for 10, 20, or 50 years and their willingness to suffer endless casualties. Perhaps the breaking point was only a bit higher—at four or five percent of the prewar population. But their tenacity and resiliency after major setbacks would tend to suggest that the breaking point might have been vastly higher, possibly even near extermination levels. As Kellen puts it, "short of . . . being physically destroyed, collapse, surrender, or disintegration was—to put it bizarrely—simply not within their capabilities. . . . Unless . . . we killed more of them than could be in anybody's interest, they could not be overcome" (1972: 106). Thus, while it is obvious they could not be beaten at a cost the United States was willing to pay, it is also possible they would not give up no matter how far the United States escalated the war, no matter how clear and efficient its strategy.

Even dropping nuclear weapons on North Vietnam and on the infiltration trails might not have done the job, unless they were dropped at near-annihilation levels. Exactly how they could be used effectively against the internal war in the south—which is where, as Lewy points out, the war had to be won—is difficult to imagine (1978: 438).

Finally, it might be observed that even an invasion of North Vietnam might not have worked. An invasion, of course, might have led to a

of this bridge on May 13, 1972 (after years of trying) is hailed by Thompson as a great triumph (Thompson and Frizzell, 1977: 104). However, by July the bridge had been rebuilt and it was back in operation until October 6, when it was successfully bombed again. Furthermore, there was an indestructible bypass route 200 yards away (Aviation Week and Space Technology, November 27, 1972: 15).

major escalation by the Chinese or the Soviets, and the war against North Vietnam might have been "won" in the same sense that the invasion of North Korea in 1950 "won" the war against that country. But even without such an escalation by Communist allies, it seems possible the United States would find itself bogged down in a lengthy, costly, agonizing guerrilla war, one which would now have been conducted throughout Indochina—a war rather like the one the French fought, and lost, in 1954.

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Comment on Mueller

*Interests, Burdens, and Persistence:
Asymmetries Between Washington and Hanoi*

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The war in Southeast Asia was a competition in resolve between the United States (with its clients in Saigon) and the Vietnamese Communists. In the preceding article John Mueller presents a fine analysis of half of this competition. The worst that could be said is that the result is a bit like the sound of one hand clapping. It is hard to appreciate fully the question of the Communists' breaking point without more explicitly considering America's. My critique, therefore, is marginally supplementary more than contradictory.

Mueller's point—that the Communists absorbed great losses in pursuit of a goal that was not vital to national survival—may undervalue North Vietnam's stake in unifying the country. The mystique of union always makes civil wars more brutal and less susceptible to resolution short of complete victory by one side than wars between separate states. If North Vietnam conceived the south as a separate entity it wanted to acquire, rather than as part of itself that it wanted to get back, it might indeed have decided it would rather switch than fight, once it felt the weight of American power. In reality, the goal of unification may have been close to absolute, rather than a relative interest that would decline in proportion to pain.

Given the tremendous disparity in the power of the contestants, the key to Hanoi's ultimate success, and the reason Washington reached the breaking point first, must lie in the asymmetry of stakes. U.S. interests were relative. In terms of *Realpolitik*, American involvement was driven by the containment doctrine, but in this regard Southeast Asia was a tertiary theater. Only the defense of Europe could provoke unlimited American commitment. In terms of idealistic motives, Washington wanted to make Vietnam safe for democracy, but years of paternalistic attempts to create strength and stability in Saigon's governing capacity failed to overcome the fatal fissiparous weakness in the political culture

and structure of our Vietnamese allies. Over time, both justifications for U.S. involvement eroded as material costs and moral revulsion grew. There is no evidence, however, that the North Vietnamese ever modified their aims; they only modified their timing.

The war was about who would govern Vietnam, an issue that was certainly more vital to North Vietnam and the Viet Cong than to the United States. By the same token, however, the difference in power made the costs of the war much greater for the Communists than for the Americans. Thus, the conflict could endure for years as the United States' limited effort stalemated the Communists' unlimited effort. Hanoi's "breaking point," if there was to be one, was linked inextricably with Washington's; North Vietnamese leaders frequently proclaimed their willingness to fight for 20 years, if necessary, until the Americans got tired and went home. In reality, the issue turned out to be less one of breaking points than of *bending* points—willingness to modify ambitions without abandoning them. Both sides' tolerance for pain on the battlefield varied with expectations about how close they were to success. The two principal junctures in this regard were in 1968 and 1972.

After absorbing almost three years of gradually intensified U.S. bombing and facing slow but steady increases in pressure from allied ground forces in the south, the Communists aimed for a decisive blow and launched the Tet offensive. This crystallized a new consensus in Washington against escalation, as the costs of persisting in that strategy clearly exceeded the gains. The American commitment did not break, but it leveled off. No increase in U.S. troop levels were authorized after March 1968. Bombing of North Vietnam was curtailed and then stopped completely later in the year. The new U.S. commander, Creighton Abrams, shifted ground force tactics away from search-and-destroy attrition operations and toward population security. The focus of U.S. strategy turned toward "Vietnamization." U.S. combat troops were gradually withdrawn in succeeding years, and were out completely by late 1971.

The Communists, on the other hand, shifted their strategy toward periodic offensives of an increasingly conventional character, bracketed by long lulls in military initiative. The southern Viet Cong political infrastructure and military units were decimated in the Tet period, as their main assets were expended in the impressive but unsuccessful countrywide attacks aimed at provoking a collapse of the Saigon government and army and a general uprising. Thereafter, the burden of large-scale Communist military activity fell almost entirely on regular

North Vietnamese units. After a series of follow-up offensives in 1968 and early 1969, and the invasion of Cambodia, American and South Vietnamese ground forces were usually unable to engage enemy units in large-scale combat because the Communists avoided contact. In the period between Tet and the Paris peace accords over four years later, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that the U.S. and Saigon government "won" the *counterinsurgency* war. More of the population was insulated from political control by the Viet Cong (who were reduced to small-unit actions and harassment, and were ground down by the "Phoenix" program), and the security of the road network increased markedly (Warner, 1978: 154-155; Blaufarb, 1977: 261-268). This was a hollow victory, however, despite dramatic growth in anti-Viet Cong sentiments among the populace after being brutalized in the Tet experience, because Saigon failed to fill the void (Goodman, 1973: 252-257; Lewy, 1978: 190-195).

In addition, this victory was hollow because the North Vietnamese were husbanding their resources as American ground forces withdrew. They were not beaten by any means, and the administration in Washington knew this, as the NSSM-1 exercise in 1969 pointed out (National Security Study Memorandum-1, 1969: 16751-54, 16766-68, 16774-77, and *passim*). Deceptively optimistic estimates of success in the war effort did play a role in U.S. policy, as I have admitted elsewhere (Betts, 1977: 184-208), but it was a marginal one. With few exceptions, decisions on commitment were made without illusions about enemy capabilities (Gelb with Betts, 1979). After Tet, U.S. intelligence estimates suggested that the enemy could replace its losses by lying low and protracting the conflict. Rather than raise the ante, the United States bent from its ambitions by handing the burden of combat over to Saigon's forces; North Vietnam bent by waiting.

In the spring of 1972, after U.S. combat troops had departed, Washington and Hanoi bent back. North Vietnam launched a conventional invasion across the Demilitarized Zone, throwing 14 divisions, 26 independent regiments, and 200 tanks against Saigon's northern provinces. Nixon responded by resuming U.S. bombing and mining Haiphong harbor. After months of intense combat, South Vietnamese forces defeated the offensive but did not manage to eject the North Vietnamese completely from new footholds (Lewy, 1978: 196-201). Both sides were shaken, and both sides bent again. After the heavy Christmas bombings of Hanoi, they reached the peace accord of January 1973. The Communists scaled down their ambitions, at least in regard to the timetable for success, in the face of renewed U.S. pressure. Washington

relented on earlier demands that North Vietnamese Army units be withdrawn from South Vietnam and cushioned this concession with secret assurances from President Nixon to President Thieu that the United States would retaliate if North Vietnam violated the agreement. (This promise was later nullified by congressional prohibition of U.S. military operations in Indochina.)

The peace accord between Hanoi and Saigon broke down quickly, but the United States withdrew its remaining military advisers and confined participation in the conflict to aid and resupply for South Vietnam's forces. In 1974 Congress rebelled against administration requests and curtailed the level of aid. Too many years of tragic carnage had gone by, too much American effort had been wasted on behalf of an inept client, and too many American dollars had been pushed into the bottomless pit. The South Vietnamese army—which had been created in the image of U.S. conventional forces to rely on high levels of technology, firepower, and logistical support—began to waver as it ran short of ammunition and parts. In its final act of incompetence, the Saigon government tried to undertake a massive retreat to more defensible lines, an attempt that turned into rout, obviated the need for Hanoi to wage protracted war, and brought the swift debacle of April 1975.

Hanoi and Saigon had comparable stakes in the war, but Hanoi and Washington did not. The Vietnamese Communists were fighting for their country as well as their principles, while the Americans had only principles at stake—and as the antiwar case became steadily more persuasive, even those principles were discredited. The only possibility of decisive victory for the United States lay in the complete obliteration of North Vietnam, an alternative unthinkable barbaric, unimaginably dangerous, and pointless. Hanoi bent but never broke because it preferred endless war to defeat; Washington bent and finally did break because the public preferred defeat to endless war.

The fundamental asymmetry of national interests was the critical factor, and overcame the salience of the greatly asymmetrical military burdens. American decision makers expected all along that this could happen, but hoped that the Communists would be “reasonable” and accept compromise rather than bear devastating destruction (Gelb with Betts, 1979: 3, 25, 118-133, 146-150, 240-245, 299-322). Mueller's excellent analysis shows why this hope was illusory. However, the full story requires the linkage of stakes, costs, and patience in the minds of the leaders of *both* countries, to clarify why the weaker would decide to

suffer awesomely and indefinitely while the stronger would decide the game was not worth the candle, and to show thus how the endless war could, after all, end.

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Comment on Mueller

American Misperceptions

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Professor Mueller's article examines one major aspect of American strategy in the Vietnam war, by addressing what was important to our own decision-making process. I am not convinced, however, that it gets at what was fundamentally significant in the conduct of the war from our adversaries' point of view. It is most revealing that, five years after the American defeat, we are offered another example of a persistent flaw in American strategic thinking about the nature of the Vietnam war. I refer to the belief that the United States was engaged in a conflict which could be measured primarily in American dimensions and within our scientific framework when in reality the war strategy that counted—psychologically and politically—was the one designed by the Vietnamese Communists and refined continuously to meet the needs of a complex situation evolving over decades.

In Professor Mueller's article we have a brilliant, well-documented analysis of an American football game set forth in terms which we find intellectually compatible. Unfortunately, the Vietnamese Communists' game was of their own choosing. While Professor Mueller's statistics are not irrelevant, the course of the war was decided on grounds closer to the Communist conception of reality and according to rules not susceptible to the precise quantification of which we Americans are so fond. Indeed, reading certain sections of Professor Mueller's analysis, I feel uneasily at home—as if I were returning to those lucid American Embassy Saigon and MACV papers of the 1960s.

My basic disagreement springs from Professor Mueller's question regarding the U.S. search for a "breaking point." He questions why the Vietnamese were "willing to accept virtually unprecedented losses for the sake of a military goal that was *far from central* to their survival as a nation," (emphasis added). This major premise misses the essence of the Vietnam war. It also reflects the fundamental misperception of Ameri-

can policy makers from the Truman era onward. The North Vietnamese viewed their fight against the United States as a continuation of the struggle for independence and unity in progress for two thousand years, initially against the Chinese and later against the French. By contemptuously labeling those South Vietnamese who did not embrace the Communist vision as lackeys of a foreign power, the North Vietnamese conveniently avoided the arguable proposition that there might have been an alternative (non-Communist) configuration for an independent Vietnam, at least in the south, and they managed to gain widespread acceptance of their point of view. We need not accept as valid the Communist construction of those difficult words—*independence, freedom, unity*—to admit that our adversaries established a clearly defined purpose for their struggle, and that they set no fixed timetable for its conclusion. What mattered was success.

While Professor Mueller correctly recognizes this open-ended time frame, he seems to overlook the corollary, that the North Vietnamese laid down no limitation upon investment of resources, human and other, to accomplish their objective. That objective, I would submit, *was* central to North Vietnam's survival. In effect it *defined* the north's national purpose: to destroy the Republic of Vietnam and the society built in the south since 1954; to expel American influence; and to unite Vietnam under Communism irrevocably. The reiteration of this national purpose in various forms and programs over the decades was absolutely essential to the continued struggle.

The United States either would not or could not recognize the essential difference in the way we and the Communists defined the objectives of the Vietnam conflict. The Communist definition of the stakes involved, of what "winning" meant, differed radically from ours. With regard to "cost," which is the crucial ingredient of Professor Mueller's analysis, their parameters for defining and measuring this factor sprang from extraordinarily different sources and psychological factors, from impulses which remained alien, and hence incomprehensible, to most policy makers throughout the war. Accordingly, it seems a mistake to apply American criteria for a "breaking point" when the North Vietnamese, the people supposedly "breaking," were using vastly dissimilar cost-accounting methods. To paraphrase a senior American planner cited in several studies of the Vietnam war (including one of Professor Mueller's main sources: Gelb and Betts, 1979), the basic American mistake after 1965 in Vietnam was assuming that the North Vietnamese, when confronted with a graduated American bombing campaign and a

strategy of severe attrition on the ground designed to elicit a response which would translate into a negotiated solution, would act like rational human beings. The Vietnamese Communists acted reasonably according to their own standards, not ours. That flaw of U.S. perception—ethnocentricity in its pure form—proved fatal to our policy.

It is puzzling that Professor Mueller provides excellent insights in his section "Sources of Communist Success" and yet fails to explain why the Vietnamese Communists did not react to our pressure the way we expected. He includes some history of other American (and non-American) wars and the casualty experiences of some of our previous adversaries, such as the Germans and the Japanese. Why did he not delve into the historical development of Vietnamese nationalism? The explanation of our Vietnamese adversaries' tenacity can surely be found in the pre-1954 history of the independence movement beginning with the Two Trung Sisters eighteen hundred years ago down through Phan Chau Trinh and the other modern precursors of Ho Chi Minh. More should be said about the politically astute (and ruthless) melding of nationalism and Communism under Ho after 1940 and the movement's clever transmutation to an anti-American struggle in the Diem era. These themes, of course, are explored in the works of Marr (1971), McAlister (1969), Fall (1963), Turner (1975), and Race, whose *War Comes to Long An* (1971) is a classic microcosmic study of Communist attitudes toward their ultimate objective over a sustained period.¹ A deeper historical approach would help dispel some of the bewilderment over Vietnamese stubbornness expressed by American leaders quoted by Professor Mueller. There was ample precedent for the frustrating American experience in Vietnam.

I find the article's allusions to the 1954 Geneva Conference somewhat misleading. It gives the impression that the DRV, by accepting "half a loaf," was demonstrating reasonableness; that is, compromising, the maximum Communist objective of unification at once. Although qualifying his judgment of Geneva with the phrase "at least temporarily," Professor Mueller implies that U.S. objectives might have been accomplished before 1973 through a similar temporary accommodation. Although the 1973 Paris Accords came after intense American bombing, it is impossible to prove that the DRV was forced to settle for

1. In popular literature, the reasons for Communist tenacity, perseverance, and discipline are key themes of Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake* (Boston: 1972), the book which more than any other shaped American elite attitudes toward the war after Tet 1968.

less than it expected to get in any event. The Accords contained the seeds for an eventual Communist victory. The Communist side would not have accepted the 1973 agreement had it not met their essential requirement for future prosecution of the struggle; namely, tacit acceptance of the continued presence of North Vietnamese divisions in the south. Watergate, Nixon's fall, and the subsequent American paralysis in foreign affairs for a variety of reasons hastened the end of the Republic of Vietnam, but that should not obscure the fact that the 1973 accords left the communist side in a highly favorable strategic position. Similarly, the 1954 Geneva Agreements, although far from perfect from the DRV's point of view, provided the basis for continued political and military struggle after a necessary respite. Did any of the American statesmen who helped fashion the agreements of 1954 and 1973 believe that with these pieces of paper the north's determination would somehow disappear?

All of this leads back to the core problem, why, as Professor Mueller concludes, "it is impossible . . . to know where the breaking point might be." The Vietnamese Communists knew what they wanted in the conflict, while the United States was unable to define its objectives consistently over a sustained period. After 1965 our definition of winning added up to "not losing," a semantically attractive but basically dishonest phrase designed to hide a failure of political nerve. The North Vietnamese understood the American predicament, having profited from similar French distress in the 1950s. After Tet 1968 it became a matter of winding down the war in a way which allowed the United States an exit from Vietnam without visible humiliation—or at least a humiliation postponed two years after our departure.

It seems to me that Professor Mueller comes very close to the same conclusion in his final pages. After the elaborate examination of various American cost calculations, his unstated conclusion seems to be that we and the Vietnamese Communists were engaged in different sorts of wars, using different rules of engagement and different criteria for success. On one level his approach, which makes up the major portion of his article, seems miscast. Yet, if his conclusion is that a statistical explanation of the failed American strategy in Vietnam is of limited significance, then his diligence in reaching that point has been worth the effort.

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Rejoinder

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There seem to be rather few points of real disagreement between my article and the two sets of comments. Both commentators stress that the United States severely undervalued the importance to the Vietnamese Communists of unification of their country. So highly did the Communists value this goal that they were willing to pay very dearly to attain it.

I quite agree. I would simply add that the costs they were willing to accept were not only unreasonable by American standards (as Mr. Brown notes), but were unreasonable by the historical standards of virtually everyone else as well. The United States is not entirely inexperienced at fighting wars with fanatical Asian regimes. But even the Japanese capitulated after suffering losses proportionately lower than those suffered by the Vietnamese Communists.

Thus, the United States was fighting an *exceptionally* fanatical regime and one which was astonishingly good at maintaining morale and at quashing any glimpses of internal defeatism. American failure to appreciate the near-uniqueness of the situation in Vietnam, the article argues, is not unreasonable—though this, of course, does not make the consequences of the miscalculation any less tragic.

Both commentators take issue with my contention that the goal of unification was far from central to the continued existence of North Vietnam as a nation. Mr. Brown argues that unification “in effect *defined* the north’s national purpose,” and Mr. Betts argues that “the goal of unification may have been close to absolute.” The costs the Communists were willing to pay to attain this goal certainly suggests its importance to them. Although my argument does not really hinge on it, I feel an important distinction must be made. At any time the Vietnamese Communists had a retreat option; they could have withdrawn to the prewar status quo (Communist north, anti-Communist south) to lick their wounds and perhaps to prepare for another effort at unification when conditions were more favorable or to devise a less costly strategy for unification. By contrast, the Japanese in World War

II, for example, had no such luxury. Retreat to the status quo of 1940, or of 1930, was never an option; the only options were victory or acceptance of enemy occupation. U.S. strategy in Vietnam was based on the idea that the Communists could be battered into accepting the middle-course option. While the retreat option was obviously a form of defeat for the north, it was not as bad an option as total occupation. As the article notes, partitions and at least temporary cease-fires are hardly unknown in the history of Asian Communism. What was not appreciated by American decision makers was that the Communists would pay (and would be *able* to pay) proportionately higher costs to avoid the middle-course option than the Japanese had paid to avoid unconditional surrender in World War II.

Mr. Brown observes that American decision makers should have taken more careful account of the long history of Vietnamese opposition to foreign domination. It is a point well taken, but it should be noted that there have also been long periods during which the Vietnamese have accepted, however grudgingly, such domination. Furthermore, the costs borne in these previous struggles were not remotely of the magnitude suffered by the Communists in the war against the Americans. The historical precedent is far from precise.

I am in general agreement with Mr. Brown's analysis of the 1973 Accords, although he apparently finds an implication in my paper which suggests I would think differently.

Except for observing that American agreement to accept North Vietnamese units in the south occurred *before*, not *after*, the 1972 offensive, I am also generally in agreement with Mr. Betts' able analysis of the course of the war. I would add only one point.

While American disillusionment with the war in Vietnam was generated in part by the increasing *costs* of the war, it also was the case, I feel, that the *value* to the United States of South Vietnam as an anti-Communist bastion was going down at the same time. There is no space here to develop this point fully, but what might be called the "devitalization" of Vietnam occurred largely because of changed circumstances after late 1965—the Communist debacle in Indonesia and the inward-turning of China during the Cultural Revolution. These events reduced substantially the likelihood of major Communist advances in South and Southeast Asia, and they thus reduced the perceived global importance to the United States of South Vietnam and helped to undercut the validity of the domino theory as accepted in 1964 and 1965.