

# Defeat in Vietnam: the US Military's False Narrative and Its Impact on Perpetuating Ineffective Counterinsurgent Doctrine

**Abstract:** The prevailing myth that the U.S. military is not to blame for losing the Vietnam War has been widely accepted. This belief rests on several common misconceptions, the most significant of which is the assertion that the U.S. never lost a battle, revealing a fundamental misunderstanding of war as an extension of politics. The military has also attributed the failure to civilian interference and domestic propaganda, overlooking the impact of its own actions and propaganda. This paper challenges these myths and examines how they have influenced the U.S. military's readiness for counterinsurgency warfare. It further argues that the defeat in Vietnam was a consequence of inherent issues within U.S. military culture.

Retired Army General William Westmoreland, the former commander of US military operations in Vietnam better known as Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) from 1964-69, stated in a 1985 press conference that the responsibility for losing the Vietnam War did not rest with the US military.<sup>i</sup> Note he implies that the US did indeed lose the war. However, Westmoreland attributed the perceived failure of the US military to domestic propaganda efforts aimed at influencing US audiences and turning them into a political force against the war effort which led to withdrawal of US forces before they could finish the job. Westmoreland further advocates that the US military and its strategy in Vietnam would have been achievable if there had been less interference from US civilian leadership.<sup>ii</sup> This perception of excessive civilian interference in military decisions during the Vietnam War has been voiced by various military figures over the years.<sup>iii</sup>

Whether true or not, the persistent myth that the US Army did not lose the Vietnam War has extended its influence to unexpected places, such as Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, a nation that remained uninvolved in the conflict. To back their claims authors argue that US forces never lost a major battle. Various authors further highlight the devastation in Vietnamese strongholds and the significant toll of casualties, noting that the US forces suffered 59,000 deaths compared to the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong's combined 924,000 deaths.<sup>iv</sup> These claims align with General Westmoreland's assessment that the US military was not defeated in Vietnam.

In my academic experience, professors have also asserted that the fact the US never lost a battle as evidence that the US military did not lose the war, after all the military was intact and simply brought home. However, the critical issue is that, despite not losing individual battles, the overall war was lost. This revelation underscores the deeply ingrained nature of this myth, permeating the highest echelons of the US military, academia, and the general US population. Furthermore, the perpetuation of the myth of civilian failure can be detrimental. The danger of the civilian scape goat theory, domestic pressure or even that the US did not lose is that it means the US military bears no responsibility and thus there is no need to analyze the war for improvement, allowing old men to hold on to their military records and ways of how they think war ought to be fought.

This paper then argues that the US did in fact suffer defeat and that the US's defeat in Vietnam is largely attributable to its military, even Westmoreland himself. By revisiting this historical case, this paper hopes to dispel myth and to shed light on the multifaceted dynamics that determined the military outcomes in Vietnam in an effort to improve our understanding of the intricacies of counterinsurgency warfare. Therefore, the research presented here is crucial, not only for its examination of a historical case study but also for its implications in contemporary

military contexts, such as the ongoing situation in Afghanistan, Africa and potential future operations involving the USA.

### **I. Methodology**

Drawing on US history and relying primarily on John A. Nagl's *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* for counterinsurgency strategy and Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* to identify key variables leading to an effective insurgency, this paper will assess Westmoreland's strategy and his perceived shortcomings in the Vietnam War. It will then attribute these failures more broadly to US military culture, largely drawing assessments from Thomas E. Rick's *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*. The paper will also operationalize the term "defeat" within the context of Clausewitz's theory of war and use this definition consistently throughout. This operationalized term will assist in dispelling the first myth that the US never lost the Vietnam War, emphasizing how absolute terms of defeat, when applied to unconventional warfare, can have disastrous effects on the outcome.

The paper will then address the second myth, which suggests that the US was defeated due to too much interference from civilian authorities. Subsequently, it will tackle the third myth, claiming that a lack of domestic support lost the war. By challenging these myths and scrutinizing, and ultimately dispelling them, they are eliminated, allowing for a clearer examination of what ultimately led a superpower to lose a war against a much weaker adversary.

### **II. What is Defeat?**

Unconventional wars are often troublesome in determining defeat just as they are in victory with each conflict perhaps having its own definitions. In the case of the Vietnam war, to suggest that the US was not defeated would require an unreasonable definition of defeat as it implies a conventional understanding of conflict. Which as this paper will demonstrate throughout such an understanding is detrimental to positive outcomes for counterinsurgents. A more limited definition of defeat needs to be operationalized, not for semantics or simply to support this paper's argument but a better definition might even help refocus strategy in unconventional or rather guerrilla warfare.

Such a definition is possible if one looks to Clausewitz's widely accepted proposition that war is politics by other means.<sup>v</sup> Therefore strategy and tactics should have been made in the context of political decisions and goals.<sup>vi</sup> In the case of the Vietnam War the US's political goal was to stop the spread of communism in *South Vietnam* not to remove it from North Vietnam. Therefore, the objective was to safeguard South Vietnam's independence with the broader fear being that its collapse would trigger a chain reaction of successive states succumbing to communism, as articulated in the Domino Theory.<sup>vii</sup> So did the USA safeguard South Vietnam's independence?

Despite decades of engagement in Vietnam, with more bombs dropped than in all of World War II and a peak military strength of 500,000 US combat soldiers, the US military fell short of achieving its objectives.<sup>viii</sup> Not only did they fail to uphold South Vietnam, but the extensive military involvement and subsequent failure to achieve their goals tarnished their international reputation and made America war weary. Viewed through this lens of political aims, the US unequivocally failed to realize the objectives they set out to achieve. This definition of defeat withstands scrutiny, and even those who might dispute linking the use of force to political aims cannot deny the failure in upholding South Vietnam's independence by the United States.

### **III. Myth One: The US Military Never Suffered a Defeat and Therefore They Did Not Lose the War.**

While it is accurate that the US military never lost a conventional battle, it is essential to reassert that they were not exclusively engaged in a conventional war. Additionally, it holds true that the US suffered significantly fewer casualties than North Vietnam and the Vietcong, with the US losing 58,220 soldiers compared to the Vietnamese losses of just over one million combatants. Casualty numbers don't paint the whole picture as the United States simply invested its resources, primarily financial, while North Vietnam invested its resources, primarily in terms of human lives. It is common for affluent democratic nations to prioritize financial expenditures over human casualties. Nevertheless, effective statecraft requires utilizing available resources strategically, and North

Vietnam's emphasis on human commitment proved to be a successful strategy, contributing to their ultimate victory.<sup>ix</sup> Additionally, the Vietnamese, oriented towards revolutionary warfare principles that hinge on patience and endurance over an extended period, were likely prepared for casualties and setbacks. The revolutionaries' remarkable patience becomes evident when examining official Vietnamese history, which aptly titles the war as "The Long Resistance." A war which spanned from 1858 to 1975, this timeframe duly acknowledges the earlier French involvement.<sup>x</sup>

In any case, measuring success through casualties reflects the Jominian concept of war that guided US tactics during the war, emphasizing the destruction of the enemy's forces rather than pacifying the Vietnamese people. This approach aligns with the direct strategy, opting for a frontal clash with the enemy. In contrast, an indirect approach involves avoiding direct confrontation and targeting other factors that contribute to achieving political objectives when taken to the extreme.<sup>xi</sup> For example, the support of the people.

People emerge as the central factor in counterinsurgency, as emphasized in guerrilla warfare literature from Mao to Che Guevara. Mao underscored the importance of "a unity of spirit" between guerrillas and the civilian population, a sentiment echoed by Che Guevara, who asserted that assistance from the people is a necessary condition for the guerrilla's success.<sup>xii</sup> Focusing on the inherently political nature of warfare, the US lost the most critical battle of the Vietnam War, the support of the Vietnamese people.

In this context, the US military's ability to avoid conventional defeat amounted to tactical rather than strategic success. Despite victorious battles, these triumphs failed to sway the rural Vietnamese populations, crucial in the context of guerrilla warfare where both Che Guevara and Mao recognized the pivotal role of the rural populace. Paradoxically, the absence of tactical defeats for the US, a metric emphasized by commanders, hindered the evolution of their war strategy. Without tangible defeats as measured by the US military's standard the US military was never prompted to re-evaluate its doctrine, at least not early enough in the war. The US military, steeped in tradition, remained resistant to desperately needed change. This is because, militaries typically entertain "heretical ideas" or reconsider doctrines only under the pressure of military defeats, leading them to be more receptive to change.<sup>xiii</sup>

Without steady pacification efforts the Vietcong could remain mobile, avoiding encirclement, and amass for attacks when required. Without pacification losses could easily be replaced and allow for an insurgency to achieve the conventional phase of attack<sup>xiv</sup>, such as their participation in the Tet Offensive. Furthermore, a conventional defeat just pushes insurgents back into the unconventional phase until they can once again achieve the conventional phase. Provided that the insurgents continue to have mobility and the support of the people. One of Westmoreland's key assumptions then was that there was not sufficient recruitment in the south to warrant any serious resources being dedicated to pacification. An assumption that would ultimately prove false, as many of these recruits would travel north to reinforce regions affected by airpower.<sup>xv</sup>

Therefore, the unconventional phase, as Che Guevara describes it, is akin to an embryonic stage awaiting the transition to the conventional phase.<sup>xvi</sup> Consequently, the military's challenge extended beyond defeating the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong; it involved winning the support of the people. At a minimum, the goal should have been to dissuade them from wholeheartedly supporting the insurgents, highlighting a lapse in addressing the political objectives for which the war was waged. This oversight rendered America's massive firepower and technological superiority a potential disadvantage. To sum Westmoreland was fighting the war he desired rather than the one he had, a perspective echoed by Major Andrew F. Krepinevich, who went so far as to characterize Westmoreland as suffering from delusion.<sup>xvii</sup>

#### **IV. Myth Two: The US Lost the War Due to Civilian Interference**

While assertions have been made about civilian leadership overstepping its bounds in military affairs and involving themselves in spheres traditionally reserved for the military, including approving bombing targets, the actual impact of civilian involvement may not have been as pronounced as military members claim. The military was even given broad parameters to run the war with Westmoreland himself stating that President Johnson and Robert McNamara, then the Secretary of Defense, allowed him to run the war as he saw fit within South Vietnam's borders.<sup>xviii</sup> Nor is

there any evidence to suggest that there was any civilian involvement directing Westmoreland on how to fight the war in South Vietnam. Tellingly, under both President Kennedy and President Johnson it appeared that Westmoreland failed to articulate how he planned to fight his war in South Vietnam beyond firepower. On top of this President Johnson would make it clear to Westmoreland that he nor his top civilian advisors, including McNamara, had any objections for using a limited number of US troops for pacification efforts.<sup>xxix</sup> Regardless, Westmoreland would use the additional troops he requested for offensive search and destroy operations.

Moreover, as revealed in the 1966 Honolulu meetings, military chiefs submitted a memo revealing that they had not clearly defined a “valid” military objective in Southeast Asia or approved a specific military course of action to achieve these yet-to-be-defined objectives. Instead, they proposed two potential courses of action: one following the Jominian concept of war, aiming to break North Vietnam's military forces, and the other, considered “lesser” by the chiefs, focusing on disrupting the support for the southern insurgency. However, plans for either course were never submitted.<sup>xxx</sup> How much could civilians truly be involved if they were never certain of the plan? Or did civilians feel they must become involved due to the lack of a perceived plan?

More than likely, it was the former as civilian leadership constantly deferred to Westmoreland, highlighting the extent of the military's and specifically Westmoreland's influence over the war. For example, it was Westmoreland who requested additional troops, resulting in a substantial increase in US forces from 82,000 to 175,000.<sup>xxxi</sup> Notably, Westmoreland specified the need for more troops with a focus on “hard-hitting offensive capability,” conspicuously omitting emphasis on pacification efforts. At this juncture, McNamara acknowledged that Westmoreland's requests contributed to an open-ended expansion of the war.<sup>xxxii</sup> Such an open-ended request was likely the cause to prompt President Kennedy to direct inquiries to Westmoreland regarding the tactics and strategy to be pursued, as well as the anticipated effects of such strategies on the North Vietnamese and Vietcong. The lack of clear answers to these questions was seen as a handicap to US policymakers' thinking. This implies not only Westmoreland's responsibility to provide a strategy but also the significant influence he personally possessed over civilian decision-making.

A subsequent cable exchange between McNamara and Kennedy suggested the President was dissatisfied with Westmoreland, as he found no comprehensive plan for victory, military or otherwise. This underscored Kennedy's observation that Westmoreland primarily emphasized tactics without presenting a broader strategic framework.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Despite Kennedy's reservations and his recognition that America was engaged in a conflict where its strategic weapons were rendered ineffective, and that US forces could slowly be “nibbled” away, he still acquiesced to Westmoreland's requests.

McNamara explicitly stated that Westmoreland's requests for additional troops and the expansion of the conflict were key factors driving the civilians leadership's decision to escalate the conflict, despite internal civilian opposition specifically from Undersecretary of State, George Ball, who almost prophetically understood that the war was already lost and that expanding the war would lead to high casualties and international humiliation.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Westmoreland became increasingly certain that he could locate, engage, and destroy the enemy, potentially overlooking the fact that guerrillas could revert to underground tactics, as they did after the conventionally focused Tet Offensive. This was a belief he expressed to McNamara who would question the wisdom of Westmoreland's assumptions regarding a permanent shift to conventional warfare. Not pressing the issue even became one of McNamara's regrets during his time as Secretary of Defense.<sup>xxxv</sup> These reservations were not only held by McNamara as other military officials and civilian officials expressed their concern about the lack of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's (ARVN) pacification progress. Westmoreland would only reiterate that the US and allied forces “must take the fight to the enemy by attacking his main forces and invading his base areas,” adding the need for air strikes.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In addition to concerns about troop numbers, a common grievance from the military was the perceived interference from civilians in bombing decisions. However, in 1965, Westmoreland struggled to persuade McNamara of the effectiveness of the bombings, possibly due to his presentation or, alternatively, because the bombings were indeed ineffective. McNamara astutely recognized that, given the minimal supplies required by the Vietcong, increased bombing would likely have little impact on the insurgency in the south. Furthermore, a significant portion of the basic supplies originated in the south due to the failure to pacify the rural population. Moreover, military

necessities for the Vietcong could be taken from the poorly trained South Vietnamese civil defense forces responsible for protecting the people. Therefore, minimizing the role of airpower in contributing to the war effort and by default minimizing the effect of any civilian interference in airpower. In any case, civilians played no role in the decisions on harassment and interdiction bombings.<sup>xxvii</sup> Another oddity is that Westmoreland would express his displeasure with the use of B-52 bombers, but civilians never instructed the military to use them.<sup>xxviii</sup> More than likely their use was an Air Force decision making the issue an internal military matter, not a pitted quarrel between the military and civilians.

Finally, critics of civilian interference may not recognize that it was a failure of civilian leadership to both manage and fire the “unimaginative commander” General Westmoreland of MACV. In this regard there was not enough civilian interference. In his book *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* military historian Eliot Cohen asserts that great civilian leadership in the likes of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill would have constantly probed Westmoreland, and that President Abraham Lincoln would have fired Westmoreland long before four and half years of his being in charge of MACV.<sup>xxix</sup> However, tactical competence masked strategic incompetence. This was evidenced by not losing conventional battles in Vietnam, which contributed to a general staying in charge for far too long despite being strategically incompetent.

#### **V. Myth Three: Domestic Propaganda Lost the War**

Domestic political pressures undeniably influenced the decision to bring US forces home; however, it is crucial to acknowledge that the war had already reached a critical juncture, notwithstanding General Abrams' strategic shift towards pacification. Moreover, the American populace was unsure that they should have ever become involved in Vietnam in the first place which is hardly a committed population and problematic given that average duration of guerrilla warfare is a staggering 16 years.<sup>xxx</sup> There was also an absence of a dedicated effort to win over the American people by the military. The government, in its entirety, faltered in keeping the public informed about the situation and failed to reveal that the US was already facing considerable challenges as early as 1964.<sup>xxxi</sup> Keeping the general population in the dark is a strategy that might be deemed reasonable for dictators, but it is incompatible with the principles of a democracy, where public opinion holds a pivotal role in governance. Consequently, the prolonged duration and escalating costs of the war, coupled with a public that perhaps never comprehended the rationale for entering Vietnam in the first place, underscored the failure of the military's efforts to garner support. It is crucial to recognize that the military cannot autonomously conduct the war devoid of civilian input, as they ultimately report to the elected civilian leadership which in turn is accountable to the American public.

The Vietnam War was also the first conflict where television cameras broadcast the war directly into households across the USA, a development that perhaps the US military failed to manage, as it had not yet encountered such a phenomenon.<sup>xxxii</sup> However, the question persists: did the military fail to manage it, or was the harsh truth, images of children being hit with napalm, so contrary to American morality that the public would not tolerate such tactics in a struggle that was not for state survival? Paradoxically, journalists also faced criticism from some who alleged that they did not fully depict the true horrors of the war, sanitizing it to make it “tasteful enough” for Americans to reconcile with.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Therefore the propaganda Westmoreland was so concerned about may have actually been supporting his cause. In any case, the inflection point in the media battle for the US population was the Tet Offensive, a battle that the US ultimately emerged victorious from, but that broke public trust in the military.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The Tet Offensive in 1968 shattered the military's narrative of progress and underscored to the American public that the strategy in Vietnam was ineffective. The Tet Offensive laid bare the reality to the US public that the war was not progressing as planned despite the US military's prior optimism.<sup>xxxv</sup> Had the military been more transparent about their challenges in Vietnam, the impact of Tet Offensive might have been mitigated as it would have been less shocking to an unaware public. Furthermore, implementing a pacification strategy earlier in the war could have potentially averted the Tet Offensive. However, such arguments pose a challenge as they are unprovable counterfactuals.

It was not just the morale of the American public that was crumbling; the US military itself struggled to address its own morale issues bringing into question its very effectiveness. In essence, the US military that was brought home at the end of the war was barely intact. By 1969, the US Army was in disarray, struggling to train

new recruits and maintain morale, largely due to the mismanagement of military resources under Westmoreland. Officers were increasingly reluctant to serve in Vietnam, and the scarcity of experienced Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) resulted in a breakdown of military discipline. By 1970, the situation had deteriorated to the point where the US military was losing a soldier a day to drug overdose, even medics were to shooting up their patients for recreational use.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The drug problem was not limited to a few 'degenerates'; it was pervasive. A 1971 survey revealed that over half of the military had experimented with marijuana or heroin. The scale of the issue was evident as the number of charged soldiers for drug use surged from 47 in 1965 to a staggering 11,000 in 1970.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

While drugs were a concern, the true indicators of a breakdown in morale and discipline were the rising numbers of desertions and outright refusal to carry out orders. Additionally, a disturbing trend emerged as soldiers resorted to killing their own officers in incidents that became known as 'fragging.' The term originated from subordinates tossing grenades into the leadership's trenches at night, as it was less traceable than a shooting. However, intentional shootings during combat may have also been an issue. According to Guenter Lewy's work *America in Vietnam* by 1972, there had been as many as 730 instances of fragging in the Vietnam War.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Nor were combat refusals just occurring with problematic individuals. At one point an entire platoon refused to move out from a night position until subtle threat of an artillery barrage came from their commanding officer.<sup>xxxix</sup> In brief, the army was a shell of itself defeated internally if not yet externally.

## VI. US Military Organizational Culture

If these myths are debunked, the question arises: why did the most powerful state in the world lose a war to a much lesser power? This question gains significance in light of the USA's recent defeat in Afghanistan, involvement in insurgent battles in Iraq leading to a failed state, and perpetual engagement in counterinsurgency missions in North and Central Africa. The answer to the question is partly found in debunking the myths and is fundamentally tethered to Westmoreland's approach to the war. However, the systemic underlying issue is a cultural one.

The US approach, as discussed in myth one, centered on firepower and adhering to a Jominian concept of war, which derived from the US military culture shaped by its experiences in two world wars and conventional tactics in Korea. Additionally, during the Vietnam War, the US was deeply engaged in the Cold War, anticipating potential conflicts with Warsaw Pact forces in Europe and was preparing accordingly. Westmoreland even drew lessons from the US Civil War, deeming it "analogous" to the Vietnam War, with the takeaway being to find the enemy and force them into combat, reinforcing the direct approach.<sup>xl</sup>

As explored in the first myth, Westmoreland violated the fourth principle of counterinsurgency warfare outlined by Robert Thompson, the head of the British advisory mission to Vietnam. Thompson, renowned for his success in quelling the communist Malayan insurgency, asserted in the fourth principle of counterinsurgency that "the government must prioritize defeating political subversion over guerrillas."<sup>xli</sup> Westmoreland's focus and reliance on firepower and technology was simply incompatible with both Robertson's principle and more generally the minimum use of force philosophy applicable to counterinsurgency. This is a challenge not just for Westmoreland but all US military members as their doctrine overemphasizes the function of violence.<sup>xlii</sup> Unfortunately, Westmoreland did not protect the local populace or use restrained force. Westmoreland would massacre the civilian population which in no way helped secure the legitimacy of the government – under his command upwards of 430,000 South Vietnamese civilians died.<sup>xliii</sup>

Counterinsurgency is the opposite to Westmoreland's forced battles, it is slow, painful, and as T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) says "like eating soup with a knife."<sup>xliv</sup> It lacks the decisive battle sought by Westmoreland, and the so-called "decisive" engagements he pursued were not truly decisive, as they failed to address the root of the enemy's recruitment and supply advantages in the south. At best, Westmoreland hoped that multiple larger engagements would lead to attrition.<sup>xlv</sup> While this strategy might be effective in conventional warfare where the enemy can be located and possesses a tangible prize worth protecting, it does not hold true for the guerrilla war in Vietnam. The Vietnamese guerrillas lacked such a prize, making it impossible for Westmoreland to force the battles he desired.<sup>xlvi</sup>

The army should have adjusted. Notably, the Marine Corps was pushing for greater pacification efforts. Its junior officers had innovative thoughts towards the conduct of the war and finally the British Army who had tremendous success quashing a communist revolution had sent advisors to assist the Americans, ultimately the Americans rejected their advice.<sup>xlvii</sup> So what is driving the car of US military doctrine, why is it so incapable of change? It begins at the top, with Westmoreland and the training system that propelled him to the leadership position, resulting in a culture incapable of rapid adjustment, especially without a significant defeat that could challenge pre-existing belief systems. In short, there is no reward system for challenging the status quo. In fact, quite the opposite may be true.

The military expert's education stems from a training institution that only prepares officers for known problems through 'how-to' instructions only applicable to *present* methods and without room for innovation.<sup>xlviii</sup> Such training and educational systems fail to create a military that is adaptive to an uncertain future.<sup>xlix</sup> Coupled with a military system that stifles creativity, fails to reward moral courage, and one that punishes questioning authority and you have a military incapable of fighting effectively outside of known parameters, the lessons of history falling short.<sup>l</sup> Spend 30-40 years working your way to the top of such a system, such as Westmoreland, and you have a military general incapable of innovating in order to deal with modern threats. The issue did not only infect Westmoreland and those with less exposure to military culture, i.e., the junior officers had put forth innovations but were abruptly quashed by those senior officers who had been steeped in US military culture and doctrine for significantly longer than they.

## VII. Westmoreland, US military Culture and the ARVN

Westmoreland's strategy hinged on a division of labor, utilizing US forces for significant combat operations to clear territory. Simultaneously, South Vietnamese forces were tasked with holding the cleared territory and spearheading pacification efforts. It is crucial to note that pacification and the protection of the local populace were underscored as secondary roles in this strategy underscoring a failure to prioritize, resource, and sequence an effective strategy.<sup>li</sup> Considering the definition of defeat and its political implications, Westmoreland had veered away from Clausewitz's principles. It appears that he was not pursuing the optimal strategy to achieve victory in the war – which involves establishing a political regime in the South capable of pacifying the rural population and effectively addressing the Vietcong insurgency over time.<sup>lii</sup> In the broader context, this decision proved detrimental to US objectives in South Vietnam, particularly in light of the second phase of revolutionary warfare. During this phase, the strategy involves attacking isolated forces to erode the population's confidence in government forces and simultaneously enhance the prestige of the opposition.<sup>liii</sup> The significance, or lack thereof, assigned to pacification under Westmoreland becomes evident in the name given to pacification which was often referred to as “the other war.”<sup>liv</sup>

The US military culture presented additional challenges for the ARVN and hindered their pacification efforts, despite their participation in numerous conventional operations. As stated throughout the fundamental problem lay in the absence of a clear counterinsurgency doctrine, and the fact that the US, operating as the architects of the ARVN, replicated not only its organizational structure, divisions, and corps but, more significantly, its doctrinal approach. Consequently, South Vietnam found itself with an army that was entirely unsuitable for the specific demands of ensuring its own state security, as it mirrored the conventional mindset of the American military rather than being tailored for effective counterinsurgency operations.<sup>lv</sup> Even then, a carbon copy of the US Army was not possible due to the intense cultural differences and language barriers, in effect making the ARVN just a worse conventional army than the American army.<sup>lvi</sup>

A further challenge stemmed from the fact that US capacity-building efforts were disproportionately directed towards the ARVN, overlooking the South Vietnamese civil defense forces crucially engaged in pacification efforts within rural areas, areas of paramount significance due to the Vietcong's reliance on them. This oversight can be attributed to the US Army's emphasis on conventional operations and the disdain of the regular US Army towards its own militia units, often derogatorily labeled as “weekend warriors.” The consequence was a South Vietnamese civil defense force that was underfunded, underequipped, unmotivated,

untrained, and entirely unprepared as a civil defense force. This left them severely incapacitated, rendering them virtually powerless to protect the civilian population.<sup>lvii</sup> Indeed, the South Vietnamese civil defense forces inadvertently played into the hands of the insurgents. Their mistreatment of local populations not only undermined the credibility of the government but also bolstered the legitimacy of the insurgents. This mistreatment even led to villagers openly revolting against the civil defense force, as their actions pushed disenchanting individuals towards supporting and the insurgent groups. Moreover, the civil defense forces served as an unintentional source of weapons as they often fled and failed to defend their own stocks.<sup>lviii</sup>

Fortunately for the U.S.A., Westmoreland was replaced by Abrams in 1969. Recognizing the shortcomings of Westmoreland's Jominian strategy, Abrams astutely acknowledged that, in the grand scheme of the war, "the battles don't mean much."<sup>lix</sup> He shifted the focus away from mere body counts and counterinsurgency, prioritizing pacification efforts and, crucially, the protection of people in rural areas. This marked a strategic shift towards an indirect approach that aimed at winning hearts and minds rather than solely relying on military metrics.<sup>lx</sup>

In contrast to Westmoreland, who delegated this role to the ARVN, Abrams considered it a central focus. He aimed at separating the insurgents from the people, akin to separating fish from the water. Under Abrams' leadership, the protection of the rural population, crucial to the Vietcong's strategy, surged from 40 percent to an impressive 97 percent in just a few short years.<sup>lxi</sup> Hanoi acknowledged the impact of the new strategy, realizing that their support in rural areas was diminishing, coupled with the loss of rice, a crucial resource for both the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army. Abrams' initiatives also targeted the vital recruitment pipeline in rural areas. In the lowlands of the south, while the Vietcong recruited 16,000 new members in 1968, by 1969, they could only enlist 100 combatants, underscoring the significant disruption caused by Abrams' strategic adjustments and its significance to alter the war had it been a strategy adopted much earlier in the war under Westmoreland.<sup>lxii</sup>

The changes Abrams implemented present a more optimistic perspective, almost suggesting that victory could be achievable with a prolonged effort. However, it came too late to undo the damage wrought under Westmoreland. Westmoreland's approach to the war resulted in what he deemed "propaganda" on the domestic front and the premature exhaustion of crucial military resources. Another indicator of the pervasive issues within the military culture is that, despite a change in leadership and strategy, Abrams faced significant resistance from officers at all levels and largely units would continue as they had previously under Westmoreland.<sup>lxiii</sup>

The shift in generalship underscored the deep-seated cultural problems that hindered innovation within US forces. When General Adams assumed control of MACV in 1968, he encountered substantial challenges in altering the US Army's approach to counterinsurgency given its entrenched commitment to Jominian warfare and firepower.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

As a global power, the United States is consistently relied upon for security in Europe and is frequently called to the periphery of international competition and conflict.<sup>lxiv</sup> As such, it cannot evade the responsibility of engaging in both conventional and unconventional warfare. Yet, despite possessing superior firepower and technology, the US military continues to face challenges in adapting to the evolving nature of conflict. Especially as the use of violence as a solution to international relations issues is becoming increasingly less attainable.<sup>lxv</sup> This is evident in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the US technological advantage over insurgents was far superior to its prowess in Vietnam, yet achieving desired outcomes remained elusive.

Recognizing this vulnerability, conventional enemies seek to exploit this weakness, even if only indirectly through proxy forces.<sup>lxvi</sup> Unconventional war presents an opportunity to confront America on a battlefield where their firepower and technological advantage cannot be fully brought to bear. To counter this evolving threat, the United States must undergo a cultural shift, a change that should have been anticipated following the Vietnam War. However, during the post-Vietnam War military rebuilding phase, the focus shifted entirely to conventional warfare. Abrams, the mastermind behind increased US pacification efforts, in particular, expressed confidence that the US would not engage in another unconventional war. This confidence was evident in his decision to eliminate the Army War College's five-week unconventional warfare program.<sup>lxvii</sup> The officers that missed this training would later find themselves at the helm of developing the grand strategies in Afghanistan

and Iraq, where the United States faced significant challenges and, in some respects, experienced humiliation once again.

The unresolved cultural and military issues and humiliation in Iraq and Afghanistan lent support to Lt. Col. Paul Yingling's criticism that ruined his budding career; "today's generals are guilty of three important failures: to prepare their troops for irregular warfare, to develop war plans that achieved the aims of policy, and to provide candid advice to civilian leaders."<sup>lxviii</sup> So, when the US military entered in Iraq in 2003, it failed to fight an effective counterinsurgency because US generals were unable to tell their soldiers how to effectively do so.

The underlying problems hindering US progress toward their goals in Afghanistan and Iraq likely went unnoticed as the military achieved tactical excellence in Iraq, echoing the same 'successes' observed in Vietnam. This pattern prolonged the acknowledgment of any strategic setbacks. The focus on individual battles appearing successful masked the oversight of broader political objectives. Essentially, tactical excellence led the military to overlook political considerations and blinded them from comprehending the larger strategic picture.<sup>lxix</sup> The lingering question is whether US military culture can evolve and adapt before encountering its next Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan. Regrettably, the recent conclusion of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with the invasion of Ukraine, has compelled Western militaries to shift their focus back to conventional warfare in Eastern Europe. This shift suggests that painful lessons may, once again, be learned belatedly, emphasizing the ongoing challenge of effectively adapting military culture to address the complexities of contemporary insurgent conflicts while staying prepared for conventional conflict.

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