

Military Victory: Political Defeat

— the Failure of US Strategy in Vietnam

by Sir Robert Thompson*

Although this article deals with the lessons of "the forgotten war", it raises several disturbing questions of broader significance. Not the least of these is whether the vocal elements of the United States people and an increasingly powerful Congress have renounced, or forgotten, the axiom that "war is an extension of politics".

This question is reflected in the current European perception of the American attitude to NATO: namely that the US regards the alliance primarily as a military tool, while the European members regard it first and foremost as a political instrument. — Ed.

In war when two countries, or two groups of countries, face each other there are four main aims leading to defeat or victory. In normal sequence these are:

- defeating the enemy's main forces in the field;
- disrupting the enemy's rear base;
- breaking the enemy's will to resist or to attack; and
- because war is "politics with bloodshed", achieving the political aims of the war.

The first and second aims are important only in their contribution to the third — breaking the enemy's will — without which the fourth and final aim cannot be achieved. The most important of these aims is therefore the third.

The first alone is not enough. There have been many wars in history where battles have been won but where the war has not been fought to a successful conclusion. Even defeats may in the long run turn out to be a success for the defeated if the costs to the winner have been too high. For example, after the battle of Malplaquet won by Marlborough, Marshal Villars was able to report to Louis XIV: "If God gives us another defeat like this, your Majesty's enemies will be destroyed." More recently we have seen how Israel won great victories in the Six Day War in 1967, but did not win the war. Subsequently, after her sensational counter-stroke in the Middle East War of 1973, which would have led to the defeat of the Egyptian main forces in the field, her enemy's will was in no way broken and Israel was therefore unable to achieve her political aims as a result of military victory. There are similar examples from World War II in respect of France, Britain, Russia and Germany.

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One notable feature of war in this century

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ry has been that the United States have always placed the greater emphasis on the first aim as the means of breaking the enemy's will to resist. They have neglected the second aim of disrupting the enemy's rear base and have generally failed to understand the fourth aim of achieving the political aims resulting from victory.

Of course, in the simple case, if the enemy's main forces in the field can be defeated, this may enable an offensive thrust with tanks to follow into the enemy's heartland which will so disrupt his rear base that his will to resist will collapse. But an offensive thrust with tanks is not the only means of getting at an enemy's rear base. There are other direct means, such as bombing and blockade (by means of mines or submarines), but there are also indirect means through sabotage, subversion and psychological warfare which can be equally effective.

Disrupting the enemy's rear base

Insufficient attention has been paid to this problem of rear bases, both from the point of view of defense and attack, in the modern context of war short of nuclear war. This aim of disrupting the enemy's rear base while securing one's own is far more important in achieving victory and breaking the enemy's will to resist than the first aim of defeating the enemy's main forces in the field. In insurgency and counter-insurgency it is the primary aim.

There are two main reasons for this. The first is that from the outset of an insurgency the many small battles are taking place inside the same rear base for both sides and not across frontiers as in invasion. For both sides the developed, populated area of the country is the rear base for control of which both sides are fighting. The second reason is that the nature of the war does not allow the main forces to defeat each other in conventional battle. In the initial stage, for example, the insurgent main forces do not exist. Later they are too elusive and, finally, if the insurgents have succeeded in expanding their rear base to control most of the countryside ("using the villages to encircle the towns"), they will have become too strong to be defeated by the Government's main forces. Correspondingly, in the initial stage the Government's main forces are too strong for the insurgents to defeat and later will not normally be defeated in conventional battle. They will only be defeated because, having lost most of their own rear base, their will (or their Government's will) to resist will collapse before a major defeat in battle.

This was exactly the situation which was developing in Vietnam between 1959 and 1964. After that period it was then greatly complicated by outside invasion, when North Vietnam began moving regular units into the South in 1964, and by the intervention of American forces in 1965. In the succeeding three years it was American strategy to concentrate primarily on

the first aim in a main force war and, secondarily, on the disruption solely of the North Vietnamese rear base by bombing. It is an interesting point that this mistaken strategy of the main force war could not have been conducted without the helicopter, so that it can be said that the helicopter, as it was used, was one of the main factors contributing to the American failure. The point was that neither the main force war nor the bombing could do enough at that stage to break the North Vietnamese will to attack, because the pace of the war was being dictated solely by the number of men they were prepared to insert into South Vietnam and, therefore, by the number of casualties which they were prepared to accept annually as a means of imposing much higher costs in all terms on the United States. During this period American military activity did nothing whatever to threaten the Vietcong's rear bases within South Vietnam. The Vietcong therefore continued to undermine South Vietnam's rear base, while their own expanded.

This led to a situation where the North Vietnamese and Vietcong were attaining the classic formula for victory in protracted war. At a cost which was indefinitely acceptable to themselves, they were, without winning any battles, imposing costs on the United States which were not indefinitely acceptable. While preserving their own rear bases, although that in the North was under bombing attack, they had succeeded by this formula in threatening the American rear base both politically and psychologically.

This attack on the American rear base was driven home by the Tet offensive at the beginning of 1968. It was a great psychological victory in the United States, for the North Vietnamese and Vietcong, and brought about the abdication of President Johnson. It also caused him to start talks which implied a readiness on the part of the United States to make concessions at the expense of their ally. In the vain hope of making the talks more fruitful it led President Johnson to halt the bombing of the North just before the 1968 presidential election. Thus by diplomatic means Hanoi removed the only existing threat to the North Vietnamese rear base.

In South Vietnam, on the other hand, the Tet offensive was a military disaster for the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong. There was a complete failure to foment a mass uprising and the South Vietnamese rear base was not seriously disrupted further for more than a short period. In fact the offensive had a contrary result. It enabled the Government of South Vietnam to mobilise the whole country more cohesively and effectively, thereby increasing the regular and para-military forces from 600,000 to over a million. At the same time, the offensive destroyed the Vietcong militarily because their regular and regional forces were committed in the fore-

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front of the battle in the towns and many units were wiped out. This in its turn created a vacuum in the rural countryside which the Government was able to exploit.

Military victory

The election of President Nixon led to a revision of strategy and a correction of the previous American mistakes. Through the policy of Vietnamization the emphasis was placed on strengthening the South Vietnamese rear base while, through the policy of pacification, the Vietcong rear bases were subjected to attack. These two policies rapidly altered the whole balance of power within South Vietnam.

One of the most notable North Vietnamese achievements throughout the war in defense of their own rear bases has been their use of deception through negotiation and diplomacy. In this respect few people understand the vital importance of the Laos Agreement of 1962 which was intended to ensure the neutrality of Laos and its territory. With the help of Russia and China, North Vietnam gained an agreement which kept the Americans out of Laos, but allowed the North Vietnamese Army (because there was no supervision) a completely free run down the Ho Chi Minh trail without which the war in the South could not have been pursued. Subsequently, by the seduction and intimidation of Prince Sihanouk, the North secured rear bases (sanctuaries) in northeast Cambodia for four divisions together with a completely safe line of supply through Sihanoukville (now Kampong Som) to these divisions. The American incursion into Cambodia in 1970, while it did not deprive North Vietnam of its rear bases there, did at least cut off this line of supply with the result that the bases then had to be supplied down the Ho Chi Minh trail. This threw a greatly increased logistic load onto this route which, with the agreement of the Royal Lao Government, became subject again to bombing attack. Moreover, with the change in the balance of power inside South Vietnam, the South Vietnamese were able to continue their incursions into Cambodia and against the trail in Laos.

The net effect of all this was that the insurgency within South Vietnam was defeated and, by 1971, North Vietnam was left with the sole option of a conventional invasion in 1972. This was an entirely new ball game and brought the rules back to a more conventional form of war, under which both sides' main forces were open to defeat in the field. Because Hanoi's action was so blatant it also reopened its own rear base to bombing and mining at a time when both these weapons were likely to be ten times more effective than they were in the past. This was not due solely to the accuracy of the new 'smart' bombs, but more to the fact that the North Vietnamese forces in the South (eventually 14 divisions) required massive day-to-day overland logistic support which offered more positive and vulnerable targets than had been present between 1965 and 1968.

The defeat of the invasion by June of 1972 compelled Hanoi to negotiate. Both its logistic system for the support of its army fighting in the South and its internal distribution system were so damaged that they could not be repaired without a respite. With the recapture of Quang Tri the South Vietnamese Army's counter-offen-

sive was gathering weight so that the North risked losing both the minor gains (6 district towns out of 268) which it had made in the South and also its army, many battalions of which were down to about 50 men. The only replacements available were 16 and 17 year olds with only six weeks training. At this point the South Vietnamese were receiving through their normal training program more than 80,000 replacements so that their army was no longer defeatable. In addition, owing to the air attacks on North Vietnam's power supplies and radio communication networks, there was the further risk, which cannot be faced by a communist country, of losing internal administrative control. Looming ahead, because of the mining of its ports, there was also the threat of starvation in the North. Even in a good harvest year North Vietnam has to import about 400,000 tons of rice or other grain. By about the beginning of 1973 the mining would start taking effect on this shortage. In the event, after the ceasefire in 1973, North Vietnam had to import one million tons of grain, which is equivalent to three months' supply at the current ration.

To defend its rear base therefore, Hanoi had to negotiate seriously. There was no other possible manoeuvre. As in 1968, this had an immediate effect — the bombing was halted, at least North of the 20th Parallel. By dragging out the negotiating process the North gained a considerable respite and at the same time, because a ceasefire was regarded as imminent ('Peace is at hand'), caused all thoughts of maintaining a South Vietnamese counter-offensive within the South to be dropped. When the "charade" ended in December 1972, and the bombing of the North was resumed, with B-52s and F-111s being used for the first time, the situation was rapidly restored to what it had been six months before — if not worse, because the intensity and accuracy of the attacks were a complete shock to the regime in Hanoi.

Political defeat

At this point the United States could have won the war and established a real peace. With American air support (but no US ground troops) the South Vietnamese rear base was no longer assailable. The Vietcong rear base within South Vietnam was reduced to a few traditional enclaves, all of which were threatened and liable to steady elimination, and the North Vietnamese rear base was threatened with disintegration and starvation with its air defense completely shattered. For the first time Hanoi was faced with a can't-win can-lose situation. A settlement could have been obtained which would have achieved the basic American political war aim of allowing the South Vietnamese people to determine their own future without fear of further military intervention from North Vietnam. But the political and psychological attack on the American rear base had by this time done its work and it was out of the question for President Nixon to attempt to convince the American people of the true situation. Nor could he drive it home on the North Vietnamese by the threat of renewing the attacks.

The terms of the Paris Ceasefire Agreement are now almost irrelevant because they have never been effective against the North (except on release of American POWs). The real effect of the agreement,

as intended by Hanoi, was to restore security to its rear bases in North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia while reviving its own military threat to South Vietnam's rear base, each of which are blatant violations of Articles 20 and 7 of the Ceasefire Agreement. As with the Laos Agreement of 1962 there was no supervision imposed on the North Vietnamese. The International Control Commission (ICC) in the first case and the present International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) were both non-operative because any action they might have taken could be thwarted by the communist members. In the case of the United States and South Vietnam, supervision by the ICCS was unnecessary, because the American Senate Foreign Relations Committee acted as the supervising and enforcing agent.

The present situation

The renewed military threat to South Vietnam's rear base, however, is still not enough to gain victory for Hanoi. The North Vietnamese Army is not yet in a position to take on the South Vietnamese in conventional battle. The threat to South Vietnam's rear base therefore has had to be carried further by mobilizing the latent anti-war forces within the United States. North Vietnam is endeavouring in this way to obtain such a drastic cut in American military and economic aid to South Vietnam that its will to resist will crack. The first indication of this was the vote in the United States Senate in May 1974 to cut \$266 million from military assistance to South Vietnam. It can be said that the United States are now being used to destroy the rear base of their own ally.

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The techniques, measures and weaponry of counter-insurgency (and of almost conventional war) attract the most attention in assessing the lessons of the Vietnam war, but only in relation to their tactical effectiveness in achieving the first aim of defeating the enemy's forces in the field. No one would quarrel much with these assessments except that, even if the lessons are learnt, they will not win such wars. The real lessons lie in the readiness and ability to use all means, both direct and indirect, at the right time to attack the enemy's rear bases while securing and improving those of the defender. Only in this way in protracted war can the attacker's will be broken before the defender's will to resist.

It should be recognized that in most of the current conflicts Russian allies and client states (and communist supported revolutionary movements) are now in a can-win can't-lose position because their rear bases are secure while those of America's allies are threatened. What is more, the latter only have to lose once. This is a matter of attitude, credibility, will and stamina — all very important weapons in anyone's armoury but in rather short supply. If, through lack of them, the American Congress under pressure from vocal elements in American society reduces aid to South Vietnam below an adequate level (on the military side such aid is already well below the permitted one-for-one replacement), there could be only one real lesson to be learnt from the Vietnam war; — do not rely on the United States as an ally. ♦♦