

The Strategic Folly and Moral Ambiguity of Limited War

The problem of end states in Vietnam and the War on Terror
by MAJ William Hardwick, MOARNG

Upon his election in 1960, President John F. Kennedy, young, brilliant, charismatic, and eager to reshape the Defense establishment, appointed Robert

“You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, yet even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.”

—Ho Chi Minh, leader of the communist revolutionaries in Vietnam, warning the French in 1946 that they would not be successful in reclaiming Indochina as their colony.¹

McNamara as Secretary of Defense.² McNamara served as an Army officer and statistician during World War II. He prided himself in translating and evaluating military operations with quantifiable metrics and mathematics.³ Later, McNamara became President of the Ford Motor Company where he continued to perfect his analysis of



Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, January 1961. (Photo by Oscar Porter, USA.)

systems efficiency.⁴ McNamara brought with him to the Pentagon the “Whiz Kids,” consisting of young, high academic achievers from elite, Ivy League educations.⁵ They distained military experience and the old way of thinking that came out of World War II.⁶ The military leaders from World War



President John F. Kennedy in the Oval Office, July 1963. (Photo by Cecil Stoughton, White House.)

II believed war was existential: if it were carried out for a just and moral cause, such as national survival, then the Nation should fight it with all its resources and heart.⁷

Supplanting the World War II view in the Cold War era was the McNamara view that warfare was a means of com-

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municating with an adversary, bending his will, and securing his subservience.⁸ In November 1963, Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, the pro-American leader of the non-communist government in Vietnam, was assassinated in a coup the United States both incoherently supported and did not support.⁹ American influence contributed to the instability in Vietnam, and America was now responsible.¹⁰ In the same month, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. On 26 March 1964, Defense Secretary McNamara outlined “United States Policy in Vietnam.”¹¹ He wrote:

The United States role in South Vietnam, then, is: First, to answer the call of the South Vietnamese, a member of our free world family, to help them save their country for themselves; second, to help prevent the strategic danger which would exist if Communism absorbed Southeast Asia’s people.¹²

President Lyndon Johnson, who escalated the deployment of special operations and conventional ground forces following the assassination of Diem and the Gulf of Tonkin incident, quickly found himself in a political Catch-22.¹³ The United States could not prevent communist control of Vietnam without total commitment and without a level of force and violence that would deeply erode America’s moral standing in the world. A victory in Vietnam, insofar as one was attainable, would have been a Pyrrhic victory—it would mean the destruction of Vietnam as a nation and the mass death of the Vietnamese people. It would have been hardly a liberation.

Furthermore, America was torn in two by the war.¹⁴ Much of the country disagreed that the war in Vietnam was in America’s vital interest and resented that the United States was imposing through its preferred form of government on South Vietnam violence.¹⁵ Alternatively, Johnson could not precipitously withdraw U.S. forces because many in the country could not stomach the utter humiliation and defeat.¹⁶ Johnson’s quandary perfectly typified the trinity of politics and war noted by Carl von Clausewitz: the passions of the people controlling the actions of the government, the calculus of the govern-



An IED that was found by the Iraqi Police and disarmed before detonation, Baghdad, 2005. (U.S. Military/DOD photo.)

ment dictating actions to the military, and the events which are the product of chance metastasizing into the passions of the people.¹⁷ Clausewitz wrote, “It is, of course, well-known that the only source of war is politics—the intercourse of governments and peoples.”¹⁸

As a result of these internal contradictions, there was no clearly defined military end state in Vietnam. There was no pathway to victory and no national support for one that might hypothetically exist. By McNamara’s earlier metrics for the success, Vietnam was operationally and tactically successful.¹⁹ The United States held nearly a five-to-one kill ratio against the enemy.²⁰ Bombings increased, territory and ports were secured, and supply routes were disrupted.²¹ Yet, none of these “solid” metrics were directly relevant to the ineffable desired outcome, which was a free South Vietnam.²² The people in South Vietnam could not both be free to choose their own path and not allowed to choose the brand of nationalist communism offered by Ho Chi Minh.²³

The military’s answer to the shame and disillusionment of Vietnam was the Persian Gulf War. Both Generals Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell were Vietnam veterans. Colin Powell—who was National Security Advisor under President Ronald Rea-

gan, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Gulf War—had formulated, through his experience and thoughtfulness, the Powell Doctrine.²⁴ Its tenants are simple, almost universally praised but woefully applied. The doctrine describes the paradigm for U.S. military action. Engage in warfare as a last resort after careful consideration of the costs and loss of human life. Only fight when a vital national security interest is threatened. Identify a clear and feasibly attainable objective. Identify an end state and exit strategy: the controllable conditions that allow for withdraw of U.S. forces. Earn the support of the American people and international community. Then employ overwhelming force and fire power.²⁵

At the end of the Persian Gulf War, Colin Powell recommended the United States not continue the mission into Baghdad.²⁶ Perhaps it was the lesson hard learned in Vietnam that provided his prescience. Conventional armies are not well suited to wage counterinsurgencies. Foreign stability operations, also known as nation building (codified in Army Doctrine as Phase IV), pose an intractable problem. It is intractable because metrics used to define success are amorphous. Success equals no more terror attacks? Terror attacks occur in almost every nation around the world,

including France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Is the end state a stable, uncorrupt pro-U.S. government? But what if that is not the kind of government the host nation wants? It is intractable because the conditions necessary for U.S. withdrawal are defined by potentialities outside of the control of the United States. It is intractable because it is a contradiction to both respect the sovereignty of a foreign nation and force ourselves upon it. In a limited war, the United States is trying to have it both ways—tugging on itself in opposing directions.

Finally, stability operations are intractable because asymmetric warfare inflicts asymmetric damage on U.S. national will. When an armored vehicle is destroyed by an improvised explosive device, the United States loses millions of dollars in equipment and training.²⁷ Less quantifiable, but more debilitating, we lose the best and bravest people our country has to send—those who volunteered to go out on behalf of everyone else. The insurgent force, however, spends little to achieve this effect, and their audacity reverberates because they have found a fissure in the dragon's armor.²⁸

In the absence of an existential threat, whether or not the military instrument of power is justified becomes much less clear. Mutually assured destruction has been effective in preventing a large-scale land war between two near peer nations—at least two that both possess nuclear weapons.²⁹ In modern warfare, the modalities for mass destruction and mass casualties are more present than ever. Long range precision fires, automated weapon systems, artificial intelligence and offensive cyber weapons all rendered the cold war calculations even more relevant today. Knowing that there can be a rapid escalation into total war narrows the set of circumstances in which nations are willing to engage in significant large-scale combat.

Our history of warfare provides an understanding that war should be avoided, but there are very real dangers out of view and out of perception for most of the civilian population. The aggregate of these opposing vectors is limited war. Limited war is politically sellable

because it does not require full commitment from the American people. It implies that war can be sanitized—not messy and not horrible. Limited war implies that the United States can continue with conflict as the status quo, out of sight and out of mind away from the forefront of public consciousness. But for the widows and orphans, for those maimed and the innocence lost, there is nothing limited about it.

If the United States government should decide that military force is necessary, then it must provide those forces all the authority and resources that are necessary to achieve the strategic end state. If our country is not willing to make this commitment, then it places military personnel in the position of fighting with no true strategy for completion while assuming all the risks one can for an ill-defined national gain. If the United States is not willing to fully commit to an operation and provide its forces strategic clarity and overwhelming odds for success, then it should re-evaluate whether military action is justified at all.

Notes

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5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid. See "graduated pressure."
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
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