11-2017

Lessons from the Village: The Vietnam War and American Counterinsurgency Tactics

Edwin Tran

University of Nevada, Reno

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh>

Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tran, Edwin (2017) "Lessons from the Village: The Vietnam War and American Counterinsurgency Tactics," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2017.070208

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol7/iss2/8>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

Lessons from the Village:
The Vietnam War and American Counterinsurgency Tactics

Edwin Tran

University of Nevada, Reno

In 1961, recognizing that the Viet Cong insurgency differed from the conflicts of Korea and World War II, President John F. Kennedy embraced covert operations in order to train the state of South Vietnam in conducting counterinsurgency operations. Such tactics heralded a new chapter in the way war would be waged. No longer was it about large ground assaults, or heroic sieges with coordinated bombings and artillery. Instead, the state of warfare in the last half century has seen considerable changes in the way it operates. New technologies and new strategies have revitalized the way war is waged and new conflicts have forced many to reconsider the way war is conducted. Modern warfare has dealt heavily with a relatively recent development: the insurgency and counterinsurgency movements. In 2014, the U.S. Department of the Army in its field guide *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies* defines insurgency as “the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region,” and counterinsurgency as “comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root cause.”¹ While these definitions were being applied to the contextual framework of modern conflicts such as Afghanistan and Iraq, these concepts are rooted in older, more historical wars. Indeed, throughout this hand guide designed for the U.S. Army, there are numerous references to lessons

¹ *FM 3-24, MCWP 3-33.5, Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies* (Washington D.C.: Marine Corps Warfighting Publications, 2014), 1.

learned from the Vietnam War. In many regards, the Vietnam War can be seen as the opening door of modern warfare. Many tactics and strategies used in modern counterinsurgencies can trace their roots back to this Cold War conflict. In particular, the Vietnam War is significant in the development of modern warfare in its heightened emphasis on establishing the counterinsurgency movement and specifically in identifying the significance the village had on insurgent warfare.

The Vietnam War is viewed within the larger context as a proxy war between the Western powers and those of the communist bloc.² Originally a French colony under the name of Indochina, Vietnam's first steps on the international theater began when a European-taught Ho Chi Minh began to spearhead the Vietnamese independence movement. After Vietnam's declaration of independence from colonial France, the country was left in a state of polarization, divided upon political lines. In July of 1955, Vietnam was officially split into two sides, with Ngo Diem's Southern Republic of Vietnam being separated from the northern Viet Minh at the 17th Parallel.³ While officially the country was to be reunited after elections, conflict began when fighting broke out between Viet Minh and Southern forces in October of 1957. While these two separate entities were engaging one another, in 1960 the Viet Cong emerged within Southern Vietnam and began waging an open insurgency in the country. For a time, the United States sent supplies and small amounts of men in order to train and assist Southern Vietnam's troops, but after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964, the conflict escalated. The United States was forced to draw its hand and call a draft. Suddenly, the United States was sending thousands of troops into the conflict.⁴

² Andrew Weist, *The Vietnam War 1956-1975* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 12.

³ Ibid., 11.

⁴ Mark A. Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 67-90.

Despite the massive influx of troops, the United States quickly realized that its methods were outdated in dealing with a counterinsurgency. It attempted to employ tactics utilized in conflicts such as the Korean War and World War II. In his book, *The Vietnam War: 1956-1975*, Andrew Weist notes that “the nature of conflict in Vietnam took the United States by surprise.”⁵ He asserts that “trained for battle on the plains of Western Europe, the US military, with its high level of technological developments, found itself... baffled by the enemy tactics.”⁶ It became clear that the Vietnam War would rely heavily on experimentation and adaptation in understanding this new type of asymmetric warfare.

The rise of an insurgency in South Vietnam posed significant issues for both the South Vietnamese government and for the United States. The Northern Viet Minh government quickly came to realize that supporting the southern Viet Cong insurgency would be vital to its own success. Professor Weist reveals that “initially the [Viet Minh] relied heavily on the forces of the Viet Cong,” who while were “lightly armed and poorly trained... [also] carried out intelligence gathering, nuisance attacks and placed booby traps that would come to epitomize the conflict.”⁷ Professor of the University of Texas at Austin, Mark Atwood Lawrence agrees with the sentiments of Weist. In his book *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, Lawrence posits that the conflict “was simultaneously a civil war among Southerners and a cross-border effort by Hanoi.”⁸ Indeed, Lawrence notes that “as the insurgency expanded, the South Vietnamese government lost its earlier effectiveness in dealing with the communist challenge”⁹. Soon, the situation seemed dire. It is revealed by Lawrence that eventually “guerilla attacks grew

⁵ Weist, 8.

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁸ Lawrence, 65.

⁹ Ibid., 65.

bolder and more destructive” and as a result the United States began to identify how it could assist South Vietnam in waging a successful counterinsurgency.¹⁰

Referring back to the U.S. Army hand guide *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies*, “the conclusion of any counterinsurgency effort is primarily dependent on the host nation and the people who reside in that nation.”¹¹ Thus, in order to defeat the Viet Cong insurgency (and realistically any insurgency in general), the United States needed not only the assistance of the South Vietnamese Government, but also that of the local villages that made up South Vietnam. Such local villages were ideal positions for the Viet Cong to move troops and supplies within the country. With this in mind, President John F. Kennedy initiated plans in order to strengthen the position of these villages. As described by former CIA operative and military historian Thomas L. Ahern Jr. in his book *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, President John F. Kennedy in 1961 “endorsed a Saigon Station proposal to launch a village defense program in the lightly populated but strategically important Central Highlands.”¹² From 1961-1963, the United States began to experiment with counterinsurgency tactics and strategies. During this period of time, “CIA innovations led the American side of the dual effort to weaken the Viet Cong’s rural organization and to mobilize the peasantry to defend itself.”¹³

Indeed, this government emphasis on the village is made further apparent in a memorandum written by Michael V. Forrestal, a leading aide to National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy. Written for the eyes of U.S. President John F. Kennedy, Forrestal highlighted the state of the Vietnam conflict as of 1963 and discussed the nature of various U.S. backed

¹⁰ Ibid., 66.

¹¹ FM 3-24, MCWP 3-33.5, *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies*, 2.

¹² Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam* (Washington D.C.:Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001), 40-41.

¹³ Ibid., 40.

plans¹⁴. In particular, he emphasized the significance of maintaining positive relationships with villages within the political hegemony of Southern Vietnam. Forrestal revealed that “the Viet Cong are still able to obtain an adequate supply of recruits and... food and other supplies from the villages of South Vietnam itself.”¹⁵ He continued this point further and questioned the integrity of these southern villages. Forrestal is keen on pointing out that in a “large number of strategic hamlets, villagers have merely let the Viet Cong in or supplied what they wanted without reporting the incident.”¹⁶ This document highlights that a key aspect in waging a successful counterinsurgency was in identifying the significant role the village played in warfare.

Recognizing this, the United States and Southern Vietnam began to take steps and measures that would target this specific factor. This became key in 1964, when the Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred. In early August of 1964, two American ships were attacked by North Vietnamese forces. This led to the passing of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which led to the start of U.S. escalation into the Vietnam conflict.¹⁷ After escalation, the United States would send approximately 2.7 million men in total overseas.¹⁸ Adhering to the words of experts such as Forrestal and Bundy, the United States government began to send troops on routine inspections of Vietnamese villages in order to root out any Viet Cong activity. An interview with an American veteran conducted by author James F. Humphries in his book *Through the Valley Vietnam, 1967-1968*, details a typical U.S. military-village interaction. Private First Class David Harker explained that “[his squad] walked for about four hours... before [they] reached a

¹⁴ Exactly one year before the heightened escalation after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident.

¹⁵ Michael V. Forrestal, “A Report on South Vietnam,” *Mount Holyoke University*, Accessed April 2016, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon2/doc120.htm>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War: The Gulf of Tonkin and Escalation, 1964,” *U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian*, accessed April 10, 2016, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/gulf-of-tonkin>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

village.”¹⁹ As per usual routine, they “swept through it, checking the straw hootches and finding lots of children, women, and older men. As usual, there was not a solitary military-age male there.”²⁰ Once the United States had grasped the significant role the village played in aiding the Viet Cong, they were quick in reacting and adapting to this phenomena. Routine checks and examinations of such areas helped in eliminating potential supply caches and hiding holes for insurgents. Beyond these patrols however, other tactics were being adapted in tandem with this. Professor Weist reveals that in the later stages of the war, “civilians were forcibly removed from their ancestral villages... and much of the area was declared a free fire zone, meaning that devastating shelling could come at any time.”²¹ This adaptive measure was enacted in order to destabilize the Viet Cong strategy. Targeting villages in this fashion meant that the Viet Cong were unable to send men and supplies to such areas without risk. Furthermore, the removal of civilians meant that recognition of enemy targets from civilian units was much easier for soldiers to identify. Just as noted in Humphries’s interview above, there was evidently much suspicion targeted at adult males within a Vietnamese village, as, and noted by Forrestal earlier, the allegiances of Vietnamese villagers could not be ascertained as easily as one would have liked.

While the United States was well informed as to the significance of the Vietnamese village, the strategy employed post-escalation was both ineffective and counterproductive. Routine inspections by military squads, often noted as “search and clear” missions, often had the unintended consequence of angering local villagers. When conducting tactics like those mentioned above, which required the displacement and removal of hundreds of villagers, anger and anti-American sentiment began to flourish. Coupled with high tensions and suspicious

¹⁹ James F. Humphries, *Through the Valley Vietnam, 1967-1968* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 100.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

²¹ Weist, 33.

beliefs held on both sides, these incidents began to coalesce into deep consequences. The most iconic of such incidents occurred in December of 1967. Dubbed the My Lai Massacre, this event highlighted the mounting tensions that were beginning to spring up between Vietnamese villagers and American troops.²² Described as a “massacre of more than three hundred civilians... in which American soldiers viewed all Vietnamese as the enemy,” this incident had the unintended effect in damaging American relations with these villages.²³ While My Lai was the most iconic of such interactions, the negative stance Vietnamese villagers had with American involvement was consistently held by many.

As a result, the efforts of the United States had in curtailing Viet Cong movement through these villages began to fail. A declassified transcript of a 1965 National Security Council meeting discusses just some of the repercussions that arose because of the strategies employed by the U.S. Armed Forces. In this meeting, Secretary of State Dean Rusk is noted as having “pointed out that there [was] daily evidence of an increase in Viet Cong activity in the central and southern part of Vietnam.”²⁴ A declassified memorandum from the CIA in 1966 echoes similar sentiments. The CIA Director of Intelligence pointed “that the Viet Cong capability to recruit and train manpower is adequate to cover losses estimated for 1966.”²⁵ These declassified documents highlight a startling point. As noted by Professor Lawrence, despite the United States’ intuition in actively combating insurgency through an emphasis on the South Vietnam village, the Viet Cong were still able to mobilize forces and move supplies through the country. He further posits that “in South Vietnam’s villages and hamlets, much of the communist

²² Lawrence, 150.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “National Security Council Meeting, Thursday, February 18, 1965, Cabinet Room, 5:20 p.m,” *National Security Archive*, accessed April 2016, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-11/04.pdf>.

²⁵ “The Vietnamese Communists Will Persist,” *National Security Archive*, accessed April 2016 <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-11/08.pdf>.

infrastructure... managed to survive the pacification effort despite suffering serious damage.”²⁶

This implies that despite American efforts in securing these villages, their actions were ultimately failing. The strategies being employed were met with little success and were instead resulting in disaster.

Ultimately, by the late 1960s, the United States began to accept the reality that it could no longer continue its involvement in the Vietnam War. Ironically, it is noted by Professor Weist that during this late period of the war, “the situation looked hopeful for the South Vietnamese.”²⁷ Professor Lawrence agrees with this point, noting that “[bombings] inflicted heavy losses... and enabled [South Vietnamese] forces to retake lost territory in some places.”²⁸ Economic, cultural, and political issues however left the United States in a precarious position; one that did not leave room for further American intervention. The United States was reeling from huge economic losses due to its heavy involvement in Vietnam. Furthermore, anti-Vietnam protests and the release of the Pentagon Papers destroyed any credibility the government had within the eyes of its citizens. Thus, by 1971, “both the United States and North Vietnam simply wanted an end to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.”²⁹ This would culminate in an agreement made between the two sides in 1972 and resulted in the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. This effectively ended American involvement within the war. While the United States was now officially out of the conflict, the war itself would continue to be waged between North and South Vietnam for years to come. Though viewed as a failure in the eyes of many, the United States was able to leave the conflict with valuable lessons. Experimentation in counterinsurgency methods and strategies, and in particular those that involved village relationships, would play

²⁶ Lawrence, 133.

²⁷ Weist, 80.

²⁸ Lawrence, 155.

²⁹ Weist, 57.

significant roles in America's future conflicts. Thus, while the Vietnam War was by all accounts a failure, the United States was able to learn from its mistakes and apply these lessons into the realm of modern warfare.

Today, modern conflicts are still operated on similar lines to those in the Vietnam War. In particular is the War in Afghanistan, which lasted from 2001-2014 and posed U.S. forces against Taliban insurgents.³⁰ Though under the banner of radical Islam, as opposed to Communism, much of the way the Afghani conflict was conducted held parallels to Vietnam. Counterinsurgency tactics utilized in this war held a huge emphasis on village interactions, a direct lesson carried over from Vietnam. Echoes from the 1960s conflict permeated into this recent Middle Eastern one. A Vice documentary *This is What Winning Looks Like* by Ben Anderson highlighted several key interactions that members of the U.S. Armed Forces had with local Pashtun villages.³¹ Similar to Vietnam, U.S. officers were seen engaging with Pashtun elders in relationship-building exercises. Furthermore, U.S. military squads were shown performing routine sweeps and checks within these villages in order to root out any Taliban supply caches and hiding spots. Most significant of all however was the underlying suspicion that American soldiers maintained while in these villages.³² At the same time, many local villagers were eyeing American troops with disdain and disrespect and tensions between both groups remained incredibly high during the duration of the film.³³ Beyond the documentary, other incidents within the Afghan conflict harkened back to strategies employed during the Vietnam War. Associated Press writer Chris Tomlinson reveals that "U.S. warplanes dropped

³⁰ NATO would follow suit in 2003.

³¹ "*This is What Winning Looks Like*," YouTube video, 1:29:10, posted by "Vice", May 27, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ja5Q75hf6QI>.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

more than twenty-five bombs in four passes over [the village Kama Ado].”³⁴ Similar to the village-bombing strategies of Vietnam, this particular incident in Afghanistan would contain consequences that once again have a distant echo to the Vietnam War.

The 2014 *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies* is rooted in the Afghan War, but is also clear in paying homage to the lessons learned in Vietnam. The hand guide specifies that “Vietnam highlights the importance of creating an assessment framework that is contextual to the insurgency” and asserts that “in Vietnam, the U.S. leadership made assumptions about what were important measures of success without connecting those measurements to situational understanding.”³⁵ Valuable lessons were adopted by the United States as a result of its defeat in the Vietnam War. In particular is the identification of the village as being a central piece in pacifying and controlling an insurgency. The United States recognized the village as an integral part in its counterinsurgency plans at a very early stage, but ultimately failed in executing such plans properly. By 1964, these counterinsurgent methods involved village-sweeps and bombings that resulted in furthering negative relationships and heightening tensions between Vietnamese villagers and U.S. troops. Despite such failures, the United States would learn from its mistakes and began to restructure its strategies in order to more successfully deal with an insurgency. By the time of the Afghan conflict, U.S. forces were applying a heavy amount of emphasis on securing village relations. Thus, the lessons and strategies developed during the Vietnam War were critical in the emergence of modern military tactics. It becomes clear that the Vietnam War was the opening chapter towards modern warfare. Whether the United States has learned and adapted enough remains to be seen.

³⁴ Chris Tomlinson, “US Bomb Wipes out Farming Village,” *Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan*, December 3, 2001, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://rawa.org/us-bomb.htm>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

About the author

Edwin Tran is a student entering his fourth and final year at the University of Nevada, Reno. He is currently pursuing a B.A. in History and a B.A. in International Affairs, with a regional focus on the Middle East. While he is interested in the history of the Ancient Near East, much of his emphasis is squared on analyzing Islamist organizations. His current research revolves on the topic of hybrid actors, and the relationship between social services and Islamist popularity.