The Vietnam Wars, Section 7

The Escalation

Diem's death did little to resolve the crisis in South Vietnam. Several thousand Hoa Hao and Cao Dai, who had been in the NLF only because they hated Diem so much, switched sides and joined the government, but this affected the military situation only in limited areas. For the next several years, there were repeated military coups and plots directed to coups, as various officers plotted against one another trying to get or retain control of the government. The basic problem of the Saigon government--the incompetence and/or corruption of most of its officers--remained unchanged. The following account, written by an American reporter shortly after Diem was overthrown, indicates how bad this could get.

If you were a Vietnamese army captain earning $40.00 a month, wouldn't you like to be a district chief?

In general, the requirements for the job are not too exacting. The main thing is dedicated loyalty to the officers farther up the line who make the appointments. Military competence is apparently not a prerequisite. Discretion and savoir-faire are...

There are lots of little things you can do to make a living. If one of your men gets killed fighting the Viet Cong, the government is now obliged to pay his family a year's salary, say, about $400. This payment comes down from Saigon and goes through you. You can charge certain "fees" without too much danger of being caught. You can charge something for providing a coffin (made free by a squad of your troops), something for "funeral expenses," something for your own expense account involved in seeing to all these matters. So you split the $400 with the family, and that's that...

You may have been able to collect a nice haul of taxes from some hamlet one month, but there's no automatic need to turn this tax money in to your bosses, if you're discreet. You can keep it, and claim that you couldn't get your tax-collection team into the hamlet because the Viet Cong was too strong there.

To make sure the hamlet makes no trouble about all this, you can always feed headquarters an "intelligence report" that a Viet Cong regiment has camped in the hamlet, along with the recommendation that the whole thing ought to be blown off the map immediately. Generally, this will be done, and the Skyraiders will be over in a day or two to bomb the town to rubble.

(Source: The New Face of War, by Malcolm W. Browne, pp. 209-10. This book, incidentally, has a preface by the US Ambassador to South Vietnam praising it as a very accurate description of the situation there.)

While ARVN officers competed with one another for personal wealth and for political power in Saigon, the guerrillas continued to gain ground in the countryside. By the first half of 1964, it was clear that the Communists were winning the war.

In August 1964, the US Navy Destroyer Maddox was on a reconnaissance patrol off the North Vietnamese coast. When the destroyer approached an area that had been shelled from the sea a few nights before by raiding vessels operating from Danang, North Vietnamese coastal defense vessels came out and attacked the destroyer. Two nights later, the Maddox and another destroyer reported that...
they were being attacked for a second time. These were the "Tonkin Gulf Incidents". In retrospect it appears that no second attack actually occurred--the radar was playing tricks, and the destroyers had opened fire when no hostile vessels were anywhere in the area--but the mistaken report of a second attack led the US to stage brief retaliatory bombing raids against North Vietnam. President Johnson used these incidents to persuade the Congress to pass the "Tonkin Gulf Resolution", giving him a blank check for the use of US combat forces in Vietnam. (See Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War, by Edwin E. Moise.)

The number of US military personnel in Vietnam had reached 16,000 during 1963; it increased still further in 1964 as the US tried to prop up the Saigon government.

Early in 1965, the US began systematic bombing of North Vietnam, and almost immediately afterward began putting US ground troop units into combat in South Vietnam. However, most US bombing continued to be directed against targets in South Vietnam, where the actual fighting was going on.

The US decision to put substantial combat forces into Vietnam was prompted primarily by the combat successes being achieved by the Viet Cong, still made up overwhelmingly of native South Vietnamese. The Communist forces in South Vietnam were just beginning to include significant numbers of northerners at this time. Hanoi had sent the first small units of the North Vietnamese Army southward in the second half of 1964, but it was several months before these units began actually to participate in combat.

For the next several years more and more Americans and North Vietnamese poured in, until by early 1968 there were more than 500,000 Americans and something on the order of 100,000 North Vietnamese. The struggle of Americans against North Vietnamese began to overshadow the original conflict between the NLF and the Saigon government.

US policy was to reduce US casualties to the lowest possible level by using equipment and technology as a substitute for men wherever this could be done. Thus the US used artillery, bombing planes, and air spraying of herbicides to do jobs that the French or the Saigon government would have had to do with men on the ground. This was effective in saving American lives--the number of Americans who died was very small relative to the number of enemy soldiers the Americans killed--but the large-scale use of artillery and air power also caused much harm to the civilian population in the countryside, and it was not always effective in destroying Communist forces.

The way the Americans used the air made the war very different from the one the French had fought before 1954. There was no area in South Vietnam that the Americans could not, if they chose, bomb very heavily when Communist units were spotted there. By the later stages of the war, there would be no area close to South Vietnam in any neighboring country where Communist forces could feel secure from air attack. The attack could come in all sizes, from helicopter gunships to the "Arc Light" raids by B-52's. American air power altered the very landscape of Vietnam; herbicide spraying by the planes of Operation Ranch Hand virtually eliminated the jungle along both sides of many roads and rivers, reducing the danger of ambush and making it harder for Communist units to move unseen.

South Vietnam became, by a wide margin, the most heavily bombed country in the history of the world; the use of US air power was almost unlimited in South Vietnam from 1965 until the beginning of 1973.

The US was more cautious, however, about bombing North Vietnam, for a variety of reasons including fear of provoking China and the Soviet Union into entering the war. US pilots were allowed to bomb the southern half of North Vietnam pretty freely from 1965 to 1968, but were kept narrowly limited in the northern half, near the Chinese border. US bombing of North Vietnam hardly happened at all from late 1968 through 1971; it resumed in 1972, this time with fewer restrictions about what could be done in the northern half of the country.

Another important use of air power was the way the US habitually moved soldiers into battle by
helicopter, which meant that they could appear suddenly in the middle of an area controlled by the NLF. During the early 1950's, operating against the French, the Communists had had large areas of South Vietnam where they could operate out in the open, without having to worry too much about immediate threats of attack. They no longer had any such areas after the American escalation.

The war was an unusually brutal and savage one. Despite the general US policy of using equipment as a substitute for men, there were some jobs that had to be done by infantry on the ground. American GI's fought a war without battle lines, in which they might be attacked without warning almost anywhere in Vietnam. They often could not distinguish enemy soldiers from local civilians.

Most of the casualties the Americans suffered were inflicted by ambushes, night attacks, mines, and booby traps. In short, when an American was killed or wounded, it was generally done by someone the American never saw and never got a chance to shoot back at. On the other hand, when a Communist was killed or wounded it was generally done by bombing planes, at which the Communist soldiers could not shoot back effectively. From the viewpoint of each army, the other was not fighting fair. This contributed to a very high level of mutual hatred.

One result was habitual mistreatment of prisoners of war. For comparison, let us consider the treatment given to American soldiers captured by the German Army during the Second World War. The German Army was not as brutal as some other sections of Adolf Hitler's government, but it was not an organization of bleeding-heart liberals. The average quality of the treatment that the German Army gave to the Americans it captured would not seem an unreasonably high standard to ask of armies in general. None of the major armies involved in Vietnam--US, ARVN, North Vietnamese, or NLF--lived up to this standard.

Both sides were comparatively aggressive during these years. Nguyen Chi Thanh seems to have been more than anyone else responsible for the decision that the PAVN should push the Americans hard, seeking combat often with the Americans despite the overwhelming weight of American firepower. Ulysses S. Grant in late 1864 and early 1865 had been willing to trade the lives of two of his own men for one Confederate; Thanh was willing to trade at an even more unfavorable ratio.

Normally, we tend to assume that in a war of attrition, the side that is inflicting the greater number of casualties on its enemy is winning. In Vietnam, the United States enjoyed huge advantages in weapons, technology, and logistics, and furthermore was able to use those advantages quite effectively; the notion that the American forces were unable to make their technology relevant on the battlefield is a myth. The result was that the number of men who died while serving in the Communist forces was over ten times the number who died in the American forces. Nonetheless, it was the Communists who ultimately won the war of attrition against the Americans; it was the United States that decided the level of losses was becoming more than the struggle was worth, and withdrew from Vietnam.

What was going on was simply that Vietnam was much more important important to the Vietnamese Communists than it was to most Americans. There is a story that Ho Chi Minh said to a Frenchmen, in the late 1940s as the First Indochina War was beginning, that the French would kill ten Vietnamese for every Frenchman the Vietnamese killed, and that the French would tire of it first. Whether or not Ho actually said this, it captured an important truth about both the First and the Second Indochina Wars. The Communists did not need to kill even one American for every ten of them who died, for the United States to tire of the struggle and quit before the Communists became unable or unwilling to continue.

It is unlikely that either side had a clear understanding of what was going on. The Communists certainly knew they were losing more men than the Americans were, but they probably did not realize that the ratio was as imbalanced as it actually was. The factors that should be considered include: a) The usual tendency of most military forces to overestimate the casualties they are inflicting on their enemies. b) The Americans had much better medical care than the Communists did; this meant that an American often survived a wound that would have killed a Communist soldier. A Communist soldier who inflicted a wound on an American that he knew would have been fatal if he himself had suffered it,
would tend to assume he had killed the American. c) The US government lied about so many things in Vietnam, with a desire to make the war look good to the public a major pattern in the lying, I suspect the Communists would have assumed that the actual number of US casualties would have been much higher than the announced levels.

American leaders had a reasonably good understanding of the kill ratio, but a poor understanding of the political realities. They often underestimated the importance of the war to the enemy leadership, and often overestimated the importance of the war to the United States. These factors, combined, may have left them poorly prepared to understand that the United States would crack, under the pressure of a relatively low level of deaths out of a large population, before the Communists cracked under the pressure of a much higher level of casualties out of a smaller population.

There have been many accounts that have overemphasized the extent to which the Communist forces hid in sanctuaries outside of South Vietnam during this period, and suggested that the American failure to attack these sanctuaries left the Americans in a defensive posture. In fact the Communists had numerous and important bases within South Vietnam, and the Americans maintained a vigorous program of offensive operations against those bases.

A few Americans had been protesting against the war for a long time; the protest movement attained significant size around 1965. It was made up of a wide variety of people, with widely differing beliefs. The five main categories were: 1) People who were actually enthusiastic about Communism; this was probably the smallest of the five categories. 2) People who were not enthusiastic about Communism but thought the military dictatorship in Saigon was worse. 3) People who did not believe US Government statements claiming that the NLF was dominated by Communists, and therefore did not think that for the US to pull out of South Vietnam would mean that it would come under Communist rule. 4) People who had no clear idea of what they wanted to happen in Vietnam, but who were convinced that what the US was actually doing was wrong. 5) People who were concerned less with the abstract merits of various policies than with a desire to avoid being drafted. The last two were the only forms of anti-war sentiment that ever became really widespread among the American population, but few of the people who felt this way became leaders of the organized anti-war movement.

The movement never had a tight, unified leadership. In its early years people of widely differing views were often able to work together in loosely structured organizations, concentrating on their common opposition to the war and not paying much attention to the differences among their own opinions. Later, very radical opponents of the war, who were usually critical of the whole capitalist system and not just opponents of the war, became frustrated and unwilling to operate within the framework of large organizations containing many moderates. Some groups of these radicals turned to violence.

In the debate over the war, the government had the advantage that anti-war sentiment seemed unpatriotic to many Americans. The anti-war movement, however, had the advantage that it did not really need to present a policy and persuade a majority of the American people that its policy was correct; all it had to do was to undermine public confidence in the government's policy. The government, on the other hand, needed to persuade the public that a particular policy--the one the US was following--was correct. In its efforts to maintain public confidence, the government was led to making many public statements that simply were not true, and which in the end could be proven not to be true.