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Command and Cooperation:
Lessons Learned In Vietnam and Their Applications
In Desert Storm

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara stands over a pile of memorandums and notes detailing the past day’s events in a jungle on the other side of the world. To him these events occur as he reads them. Until he or his staff reads these bulletins, soldiers – who in another world have been dead for a day – are alive in their home country. He contemplates putting the pile in the fireplace in his boss’s office, sparing the dead who were killed at the hand of the enemy a second death at home.

Another time, and a world apart, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney watches a satellite feed from CNN of his country’s armed forces celebrating an overwhelming victory only one hundred hours after the true conflict began. Though his Western Excursion never materialized he stands strong with a feeling of confidence in his fellow civilian and military leaders (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 368). They have learned the lessons required of them as the leaders of a new, post-Cold War America. But what lessons had America taken out of the Vietnam debacle? How was the strategy used in Desert Storm a direct result of these lessons? And finally, what lessons have the civilian-controlled American military taken out of Vietnam that could serve as the antidote to poisoned relations experienced during the late 1960’s and the whole of the 1970’s (Weigley, 1993, p. 56)?
“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself and not your enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.” (Tzu, 2003, p. 17)

From his office in Washington, President Lyndon Johnson was literally halfway a world away from the events of Vietnam. This situation is inherent given that one cannot through will or work rearrange the continents. But Johnson was at this same moment in June of 1965, half a world away from understanding that there existed a great divide between the war his military was losing, and the war being waged by the North Vietnamese and Vietcong. This distance was no one’s fault but his.

The failure to understand the motives behind the war in Vietnam was a major undoing for Johnson’s military campaign. Johnson and his staff saw the action in Vietnam as conducive to the greater struggle against Communism the world over. Ho Chi Minh was a puppet of China and the Soviet Union, and America stood alone to prevent the dominoes from beginning a chain reaction into tyranny. Of course, no one told the Vietnamese this. From the first rumbles of war in the late 1950’s, Ho Chi Minh’s forces saw the United States as a new colonial power, coming to replace the French and force the Vietnamese people back into submission beneath their boot (Morris, 2004). America struggled desperately to keep the direct combat in Vietnam somewhere less than a “real war,” and still give the United States a façade of strength against Communism (Clancy & Horner, 2000, p. 88). At the same time, and on the same fields of battle, the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong insurgency continued an already twenty year old struggle against foreign colonial powers.

This lesson was hard in the mind of the executive branch and the military during Desert Storm. General Norman Schwartzkopf commanded all United States forces in Iraq during Desert Shield and Desert Storm. In doing so, he worked closely with Secretary of State Cheney as well as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Colin Powell to ensure that every angle of the operations in the Middle East would step on as few toes as possible. The Coalition was to function in two regards. The broader Coalition’s (including Arab states) function was to house and give a base to the combat troops, while the troops would serve in Desert Shield to prevent Hussein from further invading the oil fields of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 332). These combat troops consisted of American, British, and French soldiers. The reasoning was that if Israel were to act, the Coalition would break down, leaving the combat troops with nowhere from which to stage their eventual attack to liberate Kuwait. President Bush and his cabinet, along with the Joint Chiefs explored other possible scenarios that could lead to disaster. Had one or any Arab state been asked to participate militarily in the liberation of Kuwait, the Coalition would have collapsed due to cultural standards of conduct. If Secretary of Defense Cheney’s more adventurous plan (referred to earlier as the Western Excursion) been allowed to be carried out, and Baghdad and other cities within the border of Iraq were attacked or captured, the Coalition would have collapsed. Also, had the United States decided to attack Baghdad, it is speculated that France would not have participated in the fighting. Because of the Geneva and Hague Conventions the United States would be responsible also for the costs of a military occupation and the war could have lasted for many years after the initial invasion in 1991 (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 498).

President Johnson’s mishandling of the reasoning behind Vietnam severely inhibited the country’s ability to see a clear objective to aim for. The United States as a whole, as well as Vietnam, did not understand enough about the general scenario they were fighting in to have any chance of winning. In Desert Storm, the troops and leadership had a clear understanding of what scenario they were entering when they began planning Desert Shield and Desert Storm. It is important that the leadership behind both sides of a war understand what situation they are in, and understand it from both sides. It is
not, however, enough to understand only where a nation stands as it comes to a war situation. The United States must have a clear objective in battle, a point after which combat is no longer needed and the troops and leadership can begin coming home to victory parades and the warm embrace of their loved ones.

“There is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare.” (Tzu, 2003, p. 12)

Before his untimely assassination in November of 1963, John F. Kennedy planned to remove all 16,000 military advisors from Vietnam within two years (Morris, 2004). After his assassination, however, President Johnson decided that his view, which was kept quiet in the past, was now to be the view of the nation: “You can have more war or more appeasement” (Morris, 2004). Johnson did not establish an end goal or objective. His staff and military leadership were silent when Johnson presented flawed plans for the continuation and escalation of the war (Clancy & Horner, 2000, p. 87). McNamara attempted to explain Operation: Rolling Thunder – the largest bombing campaign in the history of the world – as an attempt to win the “hearts and minds” of the people of South Vietnam by “guaranteeing their security” (Morris, 2004). But the bombing, meant to devastate the North Vietnamese into submission, may have seemed pragmatic to a President unsure about the idea of mass American casualties on the ground. But it was an unsound strategy to bomb an enemy already hardened by decades of war. Had the Joint Chiefs done their job as military strategists, they would have called for the invasion and destruction of North Vietnam on the ground (Clancy & Horner, 2000, p. 103). Though Johnson went into Vietnam with no long-term plans to leave, nor with any real handle on the basics of modern warfare, the situation only deteriorated once American troops had landed and were fighting in the jungles. Secretary of Defense McNamara’s plan of “Graduated Pressure” – basically a plan best characterized by America’s flexing technological muscle – attempted to persuade the North Vietnamese that they could not win (Clancy & Horner, 2000, p. 85). But with no objective in sight, and with Ho Chi Minh’s strategy to beat America by out lasting instead of out killing her, McNaama’s attempt to minimize the amount of force used failed miserably (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 181).

When the Coalition of Western and Middle Eastern powers began planning what would eventually be known as Desert Storm, there was never a second of doubt as to the objective. General Schwartzkopf was to remove Saddam Hussein’s forces from Kuwait, and reestablish Coalition control of the state. The only occupation of Iraq was to last until the safety of Kuwait could be guaranteed (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 386). Where President Johnson’s failed air campaign required more bomb tonnage than was used in the whole of Western Europe during World War II (Morris, 2004), President George H.W. Bush was able to employ advanced precision technology to limit collateral damage and ensure the destruction of those targets deemed necessary by General Schwartzkopf and the Air Force (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 318). By destroying command targets, the Iraqi army had no chance of organizing against the wave of Coalition ground forces that followed the massive air campaign. Though the United States clearly learned its lesson about defining and understanding the objectives and enemy in a conflict, not every mistake of Vietnam was fully corrected in Desert Storm.

“The sight of men whispering together in small knots or speaking in subdued tones points to disaffection amongst the rank and file.” (Tzu, 2003 p.40)

Throughout Johnson’s presidency, he and Secretary of Defense McNamara gave specific orders to the generals in charge of the military as to specifically which targets to bomb on any given day (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 368). This situation in Washington created very low morale, especially among pilots, in Vietnam. The targets chosen by President Johnson were political targets, not meant to be strategically important. Instead these targets were meant to force the North Vietnamese into submission. The situation became so bizarre that Johnson set new
rules of engagement that deemed not only North Vietnamese supply camps and warehouses off-limits to American aircraft, but also enemy airfields as well (Clancy & Horner, 2000, p. 88). When pilots were told they could not preemptively destroy the same fighters that would soon take to the sky and attack them, a new unwritten system emerged. Pilots would intentionally bomb targets that they found to be more strategically important than the mission given, and then report that all munitions had successfully been launched at the originally assigned target. The pilot would also report that he did not have a successful view of damages to report, and later that day reconnaissance photos would show the original target intact, and mysteriously, a nearby target of strategic importance completely destroyed (Clancy & Horner, 2000, p. 98).

In the interim period between Vietnam and Desert Storm, a significant piece of legislation, known as the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1 October 1986, gave the Joint Chiefs of Staff the right to participate in any and all deliberations of the National Security Council (Weigley, 1993, p. 57). In doing so, the legislature prevented much of the top-down policy making that led to the silence of the members of the Joint Chiefs during Vietnam. In Desert Storm, this problem of overwhelming control by the President and his cabinet was mostly resolved, but as alluded to earlier, one major mishap occurred, reminding all in command of the military of the not-so ‘good old days of Vietnam.’

In late October, 1990, General Schwartzkopf received a message from Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Colin Powell that Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney had submitted a new plan of attack. Named “The Western Excursion” by Army analysts, this plan involved invading Iraq from the west, capturing a city in Iraq, and holding it for ransom until Hussein pulled out of Kuwait. Not only was this plan strategically and tactically unsound, it would have also destroyed the Coalition because it was so far reaching into Iraq territory. Although the plan was eventually dropped, Cheney and the rest of the cabinet brought “The Western Excursion” back multiple times, revised but still too risky to the Coalition (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 368).

Aside from the western excursion, each entity functioned within its correct realm of control: The President set the political goals, the Secretary of Defense set the general military policies, and the military handled the plans for the ground war (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 368).

“All warfare is based on deception.” (Tzu, 2003 p. 9)

The dishonesty displayed by pilots in Vietnam could be construed as a lack of honor. But this dishonest behavior was instead the expression of frustration by subordinates prevented from doing what they feel is their best duty to win the war. And while one person’s perspective may not always be correct, generally the person closest to the event in question has a better feel for what is needed to improve the current situation.

The dishonest behavior in Vietnam was not limited to pilots however. Officially, the ground war in Vietnam began after the destroyer Maddox was shelled by the North Vietnamese on 2 August 1965 (Morris, 2004). Johnson took this opportunity to ask Congress for the power to wage war, which was granted to him in the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on 7 August 1964.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident may seem like proper justification for the beginning of a ground war, especially when considering Johnson’s perspective that the shelling was the forced escalation that would not end without a clear victor (Morris, 2004). The feeling that America was being mislead by its leadership abounded during the years of Vietnam. The Pentagon papers raised questions as to whether Johnson deceived the people of the United States when he brought the country to Vietnam. The loss of citizen support that followed had the same
impact as “being rejected by one’s parents (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 181).” Schwartzkopf also attributes the overall disenchantment of the soldiers and civilians during Vietnam to the fabricated body counts and unceasingly optimistic view of a distant “light at the end of the tunnel (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 344).” The images of frustration among soldiers that made the nightly news helped to fuel the destruction of the army’s public image (Clancy & Franks, 1998, p. 85). It was this unrest at home that was predicted by Ho Chi Minh as the best course to victory: “We’re going to win the war against America the same way we won the war against the French: not on the battlefield but in the enemy’s homeland (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 181).” This quote mirrors the words of General Fred Franks (ret.): “[America was] an army never defeated on the battlefield (Clancy & Franks, 1998, p. 85).”

The support for American soldiers in Iraq never ceased during Desert Storm. President George H.W. Bush made it a clear priority to build a strong case and strong coalition for the war. The American citizens still weary from Vietnam two decades earlier overcame their hesitation towards war, and learned to “separate the politics” of a war situation from their concern for the safety and morale of the soldiers involved (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 379).

“On ground of intersecting highways, join hands with your allies.” (Tzu, 2003, p. 48)

President Bush made it a point to get the United Nations behind him. The nine UN resolutions that the Coalition received allowing military action against Iraq added an international legitimacy that Vietnam never possessed. Vietnam was a completely unilateral war. America made Vietnam the location of its next great stand against Communism, but had no allies standing with it against the will of the Vietnamese people. “If you cannot convince allies of similar values of the merit of a cause, you should reconsider your reasoning (Morris, 2004).” Johnson’s America never took the time to reexamine the reasoning behind the war in Vietnam, which could have prevented some of the confusion over the objectives of the war.

The reasoning from Washington during Desert Storm, however, needed no reexamination. Iraqi president Saddam Hussein attempted to frame the coming war between the Coalition of the United States, Great Britain and France as nothing more than an attack by friends of Israel. Hussein alleged that the Coalition intended not to free Kuwait from the grips of a foreign power but instead to attack and destroy the only Arab state willing and able to destroy Israel (Schwartskopf 498). Despite this attempt to disrupt the greater Coalition, which included the above mentioned states as well as Saudi Arabia and other Arab powers, Hussein was unable to break the bonds that had been forged by a multilateral diplomatic plan of action.

“It is the rule in war, if our forces are ten to the enemy’s one, to surround him; if five to one, attack him… If equally matched we can offer battle; if slightly inferior in numbers, we can avoid the enemy; if quite unequal in every way, we can flee from him.” (Tzu, 2003, p. 16)

Graduated Pressure, mentioned in passing earlier, was the hallmark of McNamarian warfare. Secretary McNamara was appointed after the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960. As of October 1963, 16,000 American troops dotted the landscape of Vietnam in the role of military advisor. It was Kennedy’s commitment to remove them all within two years (Morris, 2004). After the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963, President Johnson decided to continue the “commitment to Vietnamese freedom (Morris, 2004)” that the United States has made under President Dwight D. Eisenhower half a decade earlier.

After the Gulf of Tonkin resolution allowed Operation: Rolling Thunder to occur, Johnson is heard on the White House tapes on 26 February 1965 contemplating the war as a game “in the fourth quarter, and… 78 to nothing. [But I am] scared of ground forces, and I am also scared of losing planes for lack of security (Morris, 2004).” By 10 June 1963, Johnson had given the order for thirteen battalions to make the move to Vietnam. General Westmoreland,
Commander of all American forces in Vietnam, asked for an additional ten battalions. McNamara suggested to President Johnson that Westmoreland receive at most an additional five (Morris, 2004). McNamara’s resistance to move manpower to Vietnam en masse resulted in a slow start in the beginning stages of the war.

Beyond the simple lack of manpower in the region, the complex rules of engagement mentioned earlier made it physically impossible to prevent North Vietnamese reinforcements from arriving in the south. Though under President Nixon the military did eventually bomb and invade Cambodia, through which the so-called “Ho Chi Minh trail” ran, by that time the war was already too long lost (Clancy & Franks, 1998).

The failure of Graduated Pressure was in the front of the minds of the leadership during Desert Storm. In the six month buildup of forces during Desert Shield, 300,000 American troops gathered and prepared for the liberation of Kuwait. It took nearly four years of combat for the same number of Americans to reach Vietnam (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 391).

The bizarre rules of engagement during Vietnam prevented the military from accomplishing its objectives. Sites in North Vietnam such as airfields and warehouses were off-limits (Clancy & Horner, 2000, p. 88). In Iraq, the Coalition air force was charged with not only preventing defensive attacks from Iraqi jets, but also with the destruction of significant airfields and many other logistically significant buildings (Clancy & Horner, 2000, p. 504).

The strategy in Vietnam was to bomb North Vietnam into submission. In Desert Storm the Coalition used “Shock and Awe” tactics and precision attack aircraft to destroy the command and control structure of Iraq, basically decapitating the enemy command, while sparing civilian casualties. Without the ability to contact the units under his command, a general is useless. And after the power grid, air defense network, and radio towers were destroyed in Iraq, there were many useless generals in the Iraqi military (Clancy & Horner, 2000, p. 504). When the Iraqi army was cut off and surrounded to the satisfaction of the Coalition leadership, the ground forces of the Coalition struck together with the endorsement of the free world (through UN resolutions) and removed Saddam Hussein’s army from Kuwait in less than five days (Schwartzkopf, 1992, p. 498).

The success of the Coalition and of America in Desert Storm is undeniably linked to the United States’ experience in Vietnam. Many harsh lessons were learned about the new face of warfare after World War II. But lessons were also learned about the reenergized struggle between civilian leadership’s commitments to politically acceptable solutions to conflict and the military’s commitments to sound strategic and tactical decision-making. Desert Storm combined the brute and overwhelming force that Vietnam lacked, with a set of rules of engagement and objectives that were attainable without unnecessary risk and without extracted combat. The command structure of the United States held up well, with the President and his cabinet making the policies that the Joint Chiefs and generals in the field followed in preparing for the liberation. The objective was completed swiftly, with minimal casualties, and most importantly, it was completed fully. There should exist no lingering regrets in the minds of the leaders during Desert Storm.

Today the United States is once again fighting in Iraq. But some of the lessons learned through the blood of American boys in Vietnam are not currently being heeded by America’s leadership. A Coalition of a handful of countries and a UN resolution gained through false evidence does not make a true endorsement. After all, if America cannot convince other countries with similar values of the justness of our cause, perhaps it is time to reexamine our reasoning (Morris, 2004).

“Hence the enlightened ruler is heedful, and the good general full of caution. This is the way to keep a country at peace and an army intact.” (Tzu, 2003, p.57)
8:00 A.M. August 17, 2001, Big Mountain, AZ. The land is barren and wasted; the plastic tape looped around the property reads POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS. Altars, sweat lodges, a sundance arbor, and a sacred cottonwood tree are demolished, and the trample dremains of tobacco ties, prayer flags, eagle feathers, and flesh offerings are scattered across the ground. Police cars, trailer vehicles, and a front-end loader are parked outside the mess.

This desolation is all that remains of Camp Ana Mae, which earlier that morning had been the site of the 16th annual Navajo sundance at Big Mountain, on Hopi-partitioned territory. During predawn hours of morning, the Hopi Land Commission entered the camp and destroyed the religious ceremony site with a front-end loader, wood chipper, and chain saws (Zoellner, 2001). Several Navajo “trespassers” at the ceremony site were arrested by the Hopi police. Earlier in the week, five elderly female ceremony participants had been arrested for entering Camp Ana Mae without Hopi government permission (Ghioto, 2001).

In a response to the destruction, Navajo Nation President Kelsey Begaye stated that “The Hopi government appears to be persecuting these families for their religious beliefs, as well as for their heartfelt desire to stay on their ancestral lands and to continue their traditional ways” and demanded for the Hopi government to apologize for their “violent