



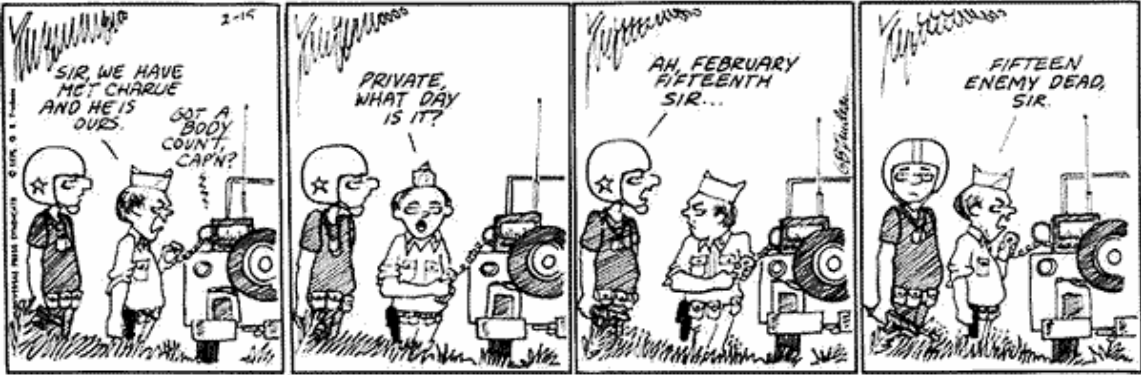
Search and Destroy
General William C. Westmoreland and the Failure
of the United States Strategy in Vietnam



Samuel Lawrence Brenner
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Professor Charles Neu

“You know,” [Colonel] Summers told a North Vietnamese colonel after the war, “you never defeated us on the battlefield.” To which his Communist counterpart replied, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.”

-Stanley Karnow



General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition also had an important effect on our behavior. Our mission was not to win terrain or seize positions, but simply to kill: to kill Communists and to kill as many of them as possible. Stack 'em like cordwood. Victory was a high body-count, defeat a low kill-ratio, war a matter of arithmetic.

-Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 1977¹

The Vietnam Conflict saw the development of the "body count" as the battlefield statistic most often cited in judging the effectiveness of United States forces, with predictable results: officers inflated these counts in order to claim greater effectiveness for their units, to compete for decorations and promotions, and to prove that they were "doing something". Much of the anger Americans feel about the war is focused on these officers, who by their actions denied their superiors essential information needed to formulate military-political strategy. Much anger is also focused on the strategy of "search and destroy" that encouraged these officers in their misdirection. This anger, however, has clouded an important question about the conflict: was the strategy of search and destroy ever a viable one? While clearly not ultimately successful, was it ever *potentially* successful, or was the United States committed to a losing strategy from the very outset of serious military involvement?

Prior to taking command of United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam (USMACV) in 1965, General William C. Westmoreland met with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and various advisors to devise the United States military strategy for Vietnam. These discussions culminated in a memorandum drafted by McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk and transmitted to Westmoreland at the Honolulu Conference in 1966. This memorandum outlined six goals, the sixth of which specifically described the strategy Westmoreland was to

¹ Wintle, Justin, ed., The Dictionary of War Quotations. (New York: The Free Press, 1989.) p. 366.

employ in fighting the war.² Westmoreland was ordered to “attrite, by year’s end, VC/PAVN forces at a rate at least as high as their capability to put men into the field.”³

The strategy that emerged from this instruction came to be known as “search and destroy.” The name, Westmoreland remarks in his autobiography, *A Soldier Reports*, was an unfortunate one; “that misnomer,” he writes, “fed the general American abhorrence for the destruction that warfare inevitably produces.”⁴ Despite Westmoreland’s objections, the name is accurate: under this strategy United States forces did not attempt to hold front lines, but instead patrolled aggressively around permanent base camps, “searching” in an effort to find and engage the enemy. Once the enemy forces had been located, United States forces pulled back from contact and brought massive firepower to bear. The VC/PAVN simply were not capable of successfully fighting a conventional action against that sort of overwhelming force, and had therefore either to disengage or be destroyed.

This strategy, according to the journalist Ernest B. Furgurson, who wrote a biography of General Westmoreland in 1968, was “most clearly identifiable as the Westmoreland concept of war in Vietnam.”⁵ As such, it is essential to consider what Westmoreland understood to be the point of these search and destroy missions. The general “called it a ‘two fisted strategy,’” Furgurson explains, and illustrated his point by shadowboxing for his audience. “He showed how a boxer uses his right hand to protect his body,” Furgurson writes, “and his left hand to keep punching, always on the offensive.”⁶ To Westmoreland the right hand represented the troops protecting the villages and “pacifying” the countryside while the left represented the troops on

² Zaffiri, Samuel, *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C. Westmoreland*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994.) p. 160.

³ Memorandum found at http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iv/55_70.html; Zaffiri, p. 160.

⁴ Westmoreland, 1 p. 152.

⁵ Furgurson, Ernest B., *Westmoreland: The Inevitable General*. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1968.) p. 322-323.

⁶ Furgurson, p. 323

search-and-destroy missions. Westmoreland describes the strategy in less colorful terms in his autobiography: “The military strategy employed in Vietnam,” he writes,

dictated by political decisions, was essentially that of a war of attrition . . . As the South Vietnamese government’s control embraced more and more of the countryside, the enemy’s recruiting base decreased and the VC had to depend upon the North Vietnamese to make good their losses. Although the North Vietnamese might constantly rebuild their units, they did so each time with manpower less adequately trained. Meanwhile, the continuing battle bought time to build up the ARVN and enable the government to solidify its position in the countryside.”⁷

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Was this strategy of search-and-destroy every viable? Of the many books written about this question, one of the most influential is Colonel Harry G. Summers’ *On Strategy*. In this work, Summers, an instructor at the United States Army War College, argues that search-and-destroy was doomed to failure from the outset because it committed the United States and the ARVN to a passive, rather than an active, strategic defense. As a result, the United States never focused on the true political aim to be achieved, containment of North Vietnamese expansion, and instead focused on a limited tactical objective, the suppression of counterinsurgency in South Vietnam.⁸ Had the United States isolated South Vietnam from North Vietnam, the real enemy, he argues, United States and ARVN forces could have built a shield behind which the Saigon government could have worked to rebuild the country. Summers’ main point is that the United States was blind to the fact that the guerilla war was tactical and not strategic.⁹ “Our so-called strategy,” he concludes, “was never a strategy at all.”¹⁰

How accurate is Summers’ characterization of United States military strategy? Since the publication of this work in 1983 his theories have gained a wide following. Summers’

⁷ Westmoreland, General William C., *A Soldier Reports: General William C. Westmoreland*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1976.) p. 153.

⁸ Summers, Jr., Colonel Harry G., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1983.) p. 175; Summers, p. 89

⁹ Summers, p. 88.

¹⁰ Summers, p. 89.

conclusions are tempting to military officers and military historians because he does not condemn the military as a whole; similarly, he labels as “simplistic” the explanation that the United States’ failure in Vietnam was the fault of the American people and that the collapse abroad was directly related to collapse of domestic national will.¹¹ “The American people,” he writes, “[were an] innocent victim.”¹² Summers essentially places the blame for the United States loss in Vietnam directly on President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and (to a lesser extent, and despite protestations to the contrary) General Westmoreland. While he may be correct in his conclusion, his arguments about the failure of United States strategy in Vietnam do not stand up to rigorous analysis.

There are many problems with this book, but the main one lies in the fact that it is not really about Vietnam at all. Summers spends over half of the work discussing Clausewitzian theory, admittedly the basis for much of successful strategy in the modern military world, and attempts to prove the accuracy of his theories on Vietnam strategy mainly by quoting sections from *On War*. There is far more primary evidence about Clausewitz in *On Strategy* than there is evidence about the Vietnam conflict, and as a result, Summers’ analysis of the failure of United States strategy appears weak and secondary.

On Strategy similarly falters in its main contention, that search-and-destroy was “not a strategy at all, but perhaps grand tactics”.¹³ Summers argues that a true strategy would have focused attention on North Vietnam, although he admits that an invasion of North Vietnam would not have been politically feasible. “We could,” he writes, “have taken the tactical offensive to isolate the battlefield. But instead of orienting on North Vietnam – the source of

¹¹ Summers, p. 11.

¹² Summers, p. 12.

¹³ Summers, p. 89.

war – we turned our attention to the symptom – the guerilla war in the south.”¹⁴ Summers fails to understand that search-and-destroy focused on North Vietnam by focusing on North Vietnamese forces. Given that the United States was neither willing to broaden the war nor invade North Vietnam, Westmoreland’s strategy was to safeguard South Vietnam by eliminating any North Vietnamese who crossed into the country. “In reality,” Westmoreland explains, “operations were aimed at finding the enemy and eliminating his military installations . . . the essentials if his base camps and sanctuaries were to continue to provide havens from which he might emerge at times of his own choosing to terrorize the people.”¹⁵

“Tactics,” writes Clausewitz, “is the theory of the use of military forces in combat. Strategy is the theory of the use of combats for the object of the War.”¹⁶ Search-and-destroy was a way for United States forces to directly engage and destroy North Vietnamese Army units and staging areas without committing themselves to an even-more destructive form of trench or border warfare. The tactics of search-and-destroy – the deployment of patrols and the employment of massive firepower – were certainly crucial, but those tactics did not define search-and-destroy in its entirety. The object of the war, Westmoreland concluded, was to so damage North Vietnam that they could no longer afford to attack the South, and to simultaneously build South Vietnam into a viable nation. Even under a Clausewitzian definition, search-and-destroy was definitely a strategy, and was focused on North Vietnam.

On a more basic level, Summers fails to concede even that attrition itself is a strategy, though perhaps a flawed one. Westmoreland himself acknowledged the difficulties with the strategy of search-and-destroy and the acceptance of a war of attrition. “Since the World War I

¹⁴ Summers, p. 88.

¹⁵ Westmoreland, p. 152.

¹⁶ von Clausewitz, Karl, On War, 1832, II.i, cited in Wintle, p. 81.

battles of the Somme and Verdun,” he writes, “[attrition] has been a strategy in disrepute.”¹⁷

While noting its weaknesses, however, Westmoreland nonetheless understood attrition to be the only possible strategy available to United States forces for engaging the NVA under the military and political circumstances. “What alternative was there,” he asks plaintively, “to a war of attrition? I had to get on with meeting the crisis within South Vietnam, and only by seeking, fighting, and destroying the enemy could that be done.”¹⁸ While a war of attrition might be horrific and wasteful, it is strategically viable and can be pursued effectively.

When Napoleon, a contemporary of Clausewitz’s, was shown a plan designed to defend France from invasion by spacing soldiers evenly along the border, he asked the officer who designed the plan if the aim was to prevent smuggling. Summers’ analysis and suggestions are reminiscent of the plan of that unnamed French officer who believed he had found a reasonable way to utilize France’s military power to protect the country. The United States military has long embraced the twin concepts of mobility and firepower as the keys to a successful strategy. With the main exception of NATO strategy in Germany during the Cold War, where NATO forces were denied the space for a defense-in-depth and were thus forced to accept a “tripwire” defense, United States military doctrine has endorsed the use of large, mobile, powerful reaction forces in place of holding specific lines. In formulating the strategy of search-and-destroy, therefore, Westmoreland was simply applying established United States military doctrine to a new and difficult problem.

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While Summers’ characterization of search-and-destroy as “not a strategy at all, but perhaps grand tactics” is inaccurate, his conclusion that search-and-destroy failed strategically is

¹⁷ Westmoreland, p. 153.

¹⁸ Westmoreland, p. 153.

obviously correct.¹⁹ Where, then, did United States strategy begin to go wrong? Even without engaging in the sort of exhaustive review of military statistics not possible in a paper of this sort, it is nevertheless possible to identify many reasons why the strategy surrounding search-and-destroy failed. Among these reasons, three stand out as the most important: first, the United States military and civilian leadership did not fully understand the entailments of a war of attrition, were not prepared to take the casualties necessary to fight such a war successfully and were not prepared for the storm of anti-war public opinion; second, the United States army was an organization ill-suited for nation-building, and therefore could not have succeeded in that mission even had Westmoreland succeeded in isolating South Vietnam; third, the Saigon government itself was far too corrupt and damaged to successfully reestablish popular control, even had the United States military and the ARVN successfully provided a military “shield” behind which it could work.

As the general self-assured tenor of comments made regarding the conflict in Vietnam demonstrates, the United States was confident in its overwhelming power and of its ability to defeat any enemy in Southeast Asia. The only question, at least at first, was whether the United States should be involved in the region at all; whether United States forces could prevail in a conflict was never really in doubt.²⁰ This attitude is reflected in many of the books that have been written on the war, which express disbelief that so powerful a country as the United States could be defeated by the much smaller and poorer North Vietnam. As American ground troops deployed in South Vietnam in 1965 it seemed obvious to American observers that a small,

¹⁹ Summers, p. 89.

²⁰ While many in the United States had been shocked by early losses in Korea in the early 1950s, by the middle of the 1960s confidence in American military might had been reborn. In retrospect, even Korea began to seem more and more like a victory in the war for containment, rather than a strict military stalemate.

communist country that had been wracked by war for twenty years already could never oppose the economic security, technological superiority, and ideological purity of the United States.

The United States as a nation and as a society was thus not prepared to wage a desperate war of attrition against a committed foe. Despite public condemnation of the evils of the Hanoi regime, and indeed despite their truth, Americans did not perceive North Vietnam as a direct threat to American soil. Not only were no lands, lives, or property threatened within the United States itself, but to United States observers the enemy appeared to be both physically and physiologically smaller and less powerful than America and Americans. The public was thus expecting both disproportionate losses in military clashes between the VC/PAVN and United States forces and a tactical military walkover – not an extended, endless conflict that would claim thousands of American soldiers.

In these expectations Americans were not disappointed; reports of “kill ratios” ranged from 5:1 to as high as 25:1, and while there are no solid numbers available it seems clear that United States forces were inflicting hugely disproportionate casualties. What the American public simply did not comprehend, however, was that a kill ratio of 10:1 meant that for every ten enemy dead, one American citizen would die as well; for every thousand VC eliminated, there would be one hundred American fatal casualties. Even those who understood the entailments of a war of attrition failed to realize that if the United States forces were trying to kill over 7,000 of the enemy each month (which was one approximation for the number of soldiers North Vietnam could infiltrate into the south) then 700 Americans *each month* would be returning home for burial. Even those Americans desensitized by the huge casualty lists of the Second World War could not understand why United States soldiers were dying in such numbers; North Vietnam, after all, was neither Nazi Germany nor Tojo’s Japan.

In response to the deaths of American soldiers, public opinion began to turn against the war, or at least the way the war was being fought. Despite Summers' claim that the explanation that the war was lost because of the collapse of national will is "simplistic," he goes on to argue that it is nevertheless true that war cannot be carried on without the support of the population. The war of attrition gradually wore down the NVA; at the same time, however, it eroded the will of the American public. Without a driving national desire to finish the war no matter the cost, the United States was doomed to fail in Vietnam if it pursued a strategy of attrition. The American public was neither prepared nor willing to fight a long, drawn out war of attrition with no end in sight.

Even if the United States military had had the full support of the American public, it is unclear whether the military pacification and nation-building programs could ever have succeeded. Despite the analytical flaws in *On Strategy*, Colonel Summers is a soldier and knows the military. "We must," he writes, "understand the nature of military forces themselves. They are designed, equipped and trained for a specific task: to fight and win on the battlefield. They are, in effect, a battle-ax."²¹ To utilize Summers' metaphor, in attempting to use military forces to engage in nation-building the United States was trying to use a battle-axe in place of a hammer. The United States military was not the Peace Corps; trying to build and develop the institutions of a healthy nation was foreign from its training and mindset. While not disparaging the armed forces of the United States, the military understanding better seems to be described by the oft-quoted American major who reported on the razing of Ben Tre during the Tet Offensive: "It became necessary to destroy it," he explained, "in order to save it."

Finally, even if the American public had been wholly behind the war, and if the United States military had proven effective at nation-building, the overwhelming corruption of the South

Vietnamese government would have prevented the United States strategy in Vietnam from succeeding. The United States was not out to gain “victory” in Vietnam; the United States strategy was to safeguard the south and fight insurgency while the Saigon government worked to gain the trust of the people. This strategy required that the South Vietnam government actually *do* something tangible for the population, such as sponsoring true land-reform, assisting with taxes, or providing jobs and education. Programs sponsored by the Saigon government, however, invariably collapsed under the weight of official corruption. In some ways, the VC assassination campaigns against South Vietnamese officials were not even necessary; by eliminating the most efficient and honest administrators, however, they did add significantly to the problem.

The strategy employed by the United States in Vietnam was never viable. It failed to take into account the conditions under which the United States forces were operating. What was so insidious about both search-and-destroy and the war of attrition, however, is that they *should* have succeeded. Indeed, had the war been fought in a vacuum or fought by machines, they would have succeeded. A war of attrition is, as Philip Caputo remarks in *A Rumor of War*, “a matter of arithmetic.” If, as Westmoreland claims was possible, the United States could have killed as many North Vietnamese soldiers as were entering the country, and if the United States military and the ARVN together could have organized an effective pacification campaign to prevent the organization of guerilla cells in South Vietnam, then the Saigon government could have worked to rebuild the country. This strategy of attrition, however, did not take into account the entailments of a war of attrition, the anger of the American public at American losses in what they came to see as an ultimately insignificant country, the unsuitability of the United States military for nation-building, and the corruption of the South Vietnamese government, which

²¹ Summers, p. 184.

would in any case have prevented South Vietnam from surviving except as a police state. “If War belongs to policy,” wrote Clausewitz in 1832, “it will naturally take its character from thence. If policy is grand and powerful, so also will be the War . . .”²² The United States policy and strategy in Vietnam were neither grand nor powerful; they were flawed, and so, ultimately, was the war.

²² Clausewitz, V.vi, cited in Wintle, p. 82.

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