

A war fought from both sides:

The ignored lessons of the American Revolution and their application to Vietnam

Garrett Brnger

Military Historical Society of Massachusetts
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As the first rounds zipping out of the tree line slammed around them, the similarities must have struck some of them, even if the bullets did not. Pressed against the dirt, searching for the muzzle flash of an AK-47 in the dense jungles of Vietnam, the grunts should have recognized the Vietnamese tactics. After all, they had once been their own.

Almost 200 years prior to America's full involvement in Vietnam, on April 19, 1775, rebel colonists had lined the path from Concord to Charlestown. The untrained militia men knew they were no match for the mightiest army of the Western world in open battle. Earlier skirmishes that morning on Lexington's green and Concord's North Bridge had proved that. Instead, they had to take a new approach: guerilla warfare. From behind trees, stonewalls and thick foliage, the cracks of colonists' muskets tolled terror in the retreating British ears. By the end of the day, the phantoms of the New England woods had inflicted 274 casualties upon the British force¹. The tactics, so effective in 1775, proved their worth once again in Southeast Asia, but this time, they were used on the same army that had perfected them.

The United States entered Vietnam with an over abundance of money, technology, manpower and confidence. Politicians and generals were certain of victory. For how could anyone stand up to the economic and military giant that was the United States? It never occurred to the "best and the brightest" that the answer might be in their own country's struggle for freedom, when they were David overcoming Goliath. If they had, they may have seen the eventual shortcomings of the war in Vietnam. For neither the Vietnam War nor the American Revolution many years before had been won solely on the basis of military might. Rather, both wars were won when the enemy, under the burden of political and economic woes, could no longer afford to carry on the fight. It was a situation American generals and politicians should have considered carefully, for it could have saved lives and perhaps, the war.

When the United States first began openly sending combat troops to Vietnam under Johnson, it was sending them to a country with similarities to colonial America. The two countries were mainly rural and the population held a mixture of political beliefs. Much like the British-appointed governors of the thirteen colonies, the anti-communist Diem was an allied leader, but not overly popular amongst the mostly rural population. Additionally, communists had infiltrated the South from the North around the turn of the decade. By 1962, the Vietcong, the guerilla army of North Vietnam, stood at 35,000 men spread amongst the population, indoctrinating them and discouraging aiding the Americans.² In its corner, the United States had only the notoriously corrupt Diem regime.

Now compare that to the support base the British Empire had within its American colonies. Many men identified themselves as loyal subjects, and until Thomas Paine published *Common Sense* in 1776, many of the colonists thought their issues lay only with parliament, not King George III. Even after the beginning of hostilities between the colonists and the British Regulars, there was still a large faction of Loyalists, if not one-third of the population as John Adams had estimated it. Potentially 50,000 Loyalists of a population of two million white colonials served with British regulars during the war, and more took up arms as militiamen.³

This is where the similarities between the two wars begin to fade. Unlike the British and the colonists, the cultural similarities between the Americans and the Vietnamese were all but zero. They shared neither a language, a history nor racial identity. The most that linked the United States to South Vietnam was its ardent hatred of communists, and that only held true with the regime that controlled the country. Its citizens were more ambivalent on the matter.

This should have struck war planners for Vietnam as a noteworthy characteristic of the population. Even with the conviction of 50,000 men who served in arms against their neighbors,

the British could never incite the population to rise in popular support. Though many may have supported the crown, they attempted to keep such beliefs to themselves if possible. If a man refused to take a loyalty oath, he was apt to have his house “confiscated” under a 1777 resolution by the Continental Congress.⁴ Loyalty was just simply not worth the trouble.

The story was no different with the South Vietnamese military, with whom the United States needed to work carefully. Scholars and veterans differ in their opinions of the average ARVN soldier, whether he was a coward or a courageous patriot, but they rarely differ in their disgust for ARVN officers. General Westmoreland thought the ARVN needed Americans to prop them up and never trusted them enough to stand on their own. Loyalty was always in question. In 1964, the desertion rate was 6,000 men per month, and American weapons so often ended up in Vietcong hands that some ARVN outposts earned the derisive handle “Vietcong PX”.⁵

When compared to the rebels’ use of fear and its success, America should not have been surprised by the lack of cooperation amongst South Vietnamese villagers who were terrorized by the much more barbaric tactics employed by the Vietcong during the war. If Loyalist colonists could turn their back on the British, who they believed to be fellow countrymen, why then did Americans presume the local Vietnamese would be any more swayed by a foreign army that did not understand their history or culture?

Any favor American forces curried with villagers by appealing to their well-being or their own hatred of the communists, like the Montagnards, they generally squandered with short-sighted practices of “Zippo brigades” and bombing runs. By 1966, over 2 million South Vietnamese had lost their homes through either accidental bombings or their intentional

destruction by US and ARVN troops.⁶ It takes little imagination to figure out how that affected American credibility.

The Strategic Hamlet program was almost as unsuccessful. American troops displaced South Vietnamese villagers from their traditional homes and herded them into small, cramped concentration camp-like hamlets where the population was supposedly able to be more closely monitored and protected from the Vietcong. All it ended up doing was creating more recruits for the VC who told the villagers “when the Diem regime falls and the Americans leave, you will be able to go home again.”⁷

The main problem in connecting with the population was American soldiers were unable to empathize well with the Vietnamese villagers with whom they shared absolutely nothing. During the American Revolution, a British Army Captain was dissuaded from ransacking a colonist’s home because she shared his last name.⁸ The lack of any such connections, or ability to communicate them, distanced the American soldiers and Marines from the very people they believed to be protecting and prevented the Americans of maintaining a support base as strong as the British had within the colonies during the revolution.

If they had wanted the general support the British maintained throughout their operations in North America, the United States should have taken a more proactive approach in actually “winning hearts and minds”. The British lack of full-scale, wanton destruction kept them from becoming detested by the population whereas American firepower all but ensured these sentiments. General Krulak, the future commandant of the Marine Corps, suggested mixing Marines with South Vietnamese platoons and using them to pacify the country and provide needed resources. General Westmoreland, the commander of military operations in Vietnam, vetoed the idea and decided to go for a fully military solution to the war, ignoring the citizens.⁹

It was not only the civilians that the Americans did not understand; it was also their enemy. Even if the average grunt in Vietnam knew his enemy to be resilient and determined, if not well-armed or trained, the top brass remained ignorant of the motivations and capabilities of the Vietnamese communists. They assumed that a war of attrition would dissuade them of their views, ignoring the fact that the French had killed almost 1.3 million Vietnamese in their eight year war against the Vietminh, the precursor to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and VC.¹⁰ In what could most likely be written off as ideological blindness, many American officers refused to acknowledge the determination of the average communist guerilla.

A longer, more objective examination of the communist forces would have revealed that although they fought for different beliefs, the Vietcong and the Americans in the Continental Army were quite similar in their convictions; both were fighting for a cause they were loath to give up. The Vietnamese fought from 1946 until the fall of Saigon in 1975 for an independent Vietnam under Communist rule. Many of the “men in black pajamas” who shot at Americans in the rice paddies had also held French soldiers in between their cross hairs at Dienbienphu. They were not about to drop the cause because the enemy had changed. Similarly, American colonists had protested, rioted and finally fired shots at the British. Perhaps the freedom the communists sought did not register in the minds of American leaders as the same their ancestors had fought for, but that does not mean the communists yearned any less for it.

American soldiers in Vietnam more closely resembled the British regulars of the Revolution than they did the colonists. While the colonists had mainly volunteered – the difference was made up by draftees from the colonies – American support for the Vietnam war was less popular and the military had to subsequently rely on similar caliber recruits into the armed-services. With a few exceptions, such as the Scottish regiments, the redcoats were made

up of the lowest rungs of British society, those who were considered unemployable elsewhere.¹¹ American soldiers and sailors were normally much better than an average 18th century British recruit, but many were drawn from the bottom tier of society, those who could not obtain a deferment or get out of their duty. The poor and minorities swelled the ranks the way foreigners and German mercenaries had inflated British numbers years before. Arrogance in both countries military institutions convinced them that the quality or beliefs of the recruits mattered little.

The British and the Americans in Vietnam both sought large, military victories on their own terms, forgetting that the enemy always has a say. The British actively sought out a decisive battle in which they could destroy the rebel army, even though “from Bombay to Boston, not more than fifty thousand men work the king’s red coat”¹². The United States also hoped to flex its enormous, mechanical military might until the North was forced into surrendering. “Grab ‘em by the balls,” General Lyman Lemnitzer, Chairman of JCS told Kennedy in 1961 “and their hearts and minds will follow.”¹³ General Lemnitzer got his wish with President Johnson a few years later. Bombing campaigns and massive troop commitments were the calling cards of Johnson’s administration in Vietnam.

Although Johnson quickly found the North Vietnamese were set on maintaining their support for the Vietcong, no matter how he grabbed them. The three-year bombing campaign Operation Rolling Thunder was originally designed to destroy morale, but after a month and a half the objective switched to destroying the North’s capability to fight, as they showed no sign of diminishing their support of the communist guerillas in the South.¹⁴ Even the destruction of their infrastructure did not stop the communists entirely; it merely slowed them. If B-52s bombed a bridge, it was rebuilt the next day. If they bombed an airfield, 100 laborers would set out to repair it after the planes had passed.¹⁵

There are, of course, no accurate analogies for modern bombing campaigns in the age of the American Revolution, but their affect on strategy is certainly applicable. American firepower could be compared to overwhelming British military superiority during the early years of the revolution, and from that one can easily deduce the style of warfare the VC and NVA forces would adopt: hit and run. That was not the type of war the Americans wanted to fight though, and they actively pursued the enemy with overwhelming force. However, the enemy refused to play along, and the American persistence at overwhelming force caused a journalist to describe the situation as “a sledgehammer on a floating cork. Somehow the cork refused to stay down.”¹⁶

The American sledgehammer - airpower, artillery, tanks and advanced small arms – encouraged communist forces to keep their distance until they had the advantage- in numbers or by surprise. General Giap and his officers were not foolhardy enough to engage the Americans in full-frontal assaults until they felt they had the advantage. The Vietnamese were not opposed to sustaining casualties – they claimed victory in the Ia Drang valley despite a casualty ratio of 11:1¹⁷ – they avoided large scale battles that they could not possibly win. The Continental Army was not slow to retreat and avoid costly battles either. Playing the cork, Washington evacuated Brooklyn instead of defending it, knowing full well he could not hold it and the revolution would die with his men there if they were to face a siege of the Brooklyn heights.¹⁸ Instead, he resurfaced further South and waited again for the sledgehammer. General Westmoreland should have known that, like Washington, Giap would attack once he felt he had the advantage.

Though these occasions almost invariably ended in failure- most of the attacks during the Tet Offensive in 1968 was repulsed within days and resulted in 80% combat effective losses for the Vietcong¹⁹ - it should not have taken US forces by surprise as it did. After all, the US Army has its own proud tradition of surprise offensives. When Washington crossed the Delaware on

Christmas of 1776 with a force of 6,000 men, he took the 3,500 Hessian mercenaries completely by surprise.²⁰ The ensuing battles of Trenton and Princeton allowed the Christmas Campaigns to be chalked up as a success for the Continental Army. The idea that an Asian military force would use such a strategy to catch its enemy off guard at a time when most G.I.s and ARVN soldiers were on leave does not seem unreasonable.

Whereas the goals of both the British Army and the American military in Vietnam were the same – destroy the opposing army – it is unlikely that there could have been many lessons learned from that particular similarity. For the British, the Continental Army was a legitimate and tangible target. There was no city to take that would have toppled the entire movement; they had occupied Boston for several years, and it was still the first city to rebel against English rule. Philadelphia, the unofficial capital, was no more important either. It was just the most convenient place for the members of the Continental Congress to meet; there was no permanent, vital infrastructure there.²¹ Destroying the army was the only way to fully squash the rebellion.

Vietnam was a much different story, as a war of attrition showed itself to be the wrong strategy time and time again. General Lemnitzer, who proposed to “grab ‘em by the balls” replied in 1961 to a Psy Ops officer’s observation that the French had killed or wounded a million Vietminh and still gone home defeated that the French “Didn’t kill enough then. We’ll teach ‘em to kill more.”²² This bravado-filled retort encompassed the United States’ mission in Vietnam: kill more of them than they do us. Experience and 20/20 hindsight soon showed that to be a faulty method, but it was one that continued. No matter what happened, the North was always able to supply more men- 250,000-350,000 new recruits each year by Ho Chi Minh’s estimate²³- mainly thanks to the American firepower that devastated the North and the South. Again, this is of little surprise. Though the “rage militaire” that had colonists running to the

sound of the guns cooled quickly, recruitment and troop levels stayed at high enough levels to conduct operations throughout the war.

What should have been looked at more closely in both wars was depriving the enemy of supply routes. Although the validity of the objectives they were pursuing is debatable, the efficacy of cutting supply routes is age-old and time proven. The British often toyed with the idea of controlling the Hudson, but little was ever seriously done about it, especially after Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga. The Americans often talked of destroying the Ho Chi Minh trail, the network of footpaths and small roads that effectively transported thousands of tons of supply to the South, but they preferred to do it from several thousand feet up.

This was not an entirely faulty strategy. During the Eastertide offensive in 1972 Richard Nixon used Operation Linebacker to force the North back to the negotiating table. For weeks, B-52s pounded the North Vietnamese at 45-minute intervals, effectively halting a communist offensive on the verge of victory as well as destroying much of its logistical network.²⁴ This was mainly in thanks to new "smart-bombs", which allowed F-4 Phantoms to put rounds on target extremely accurately as compared to the B-52's "dumb bombs" which created mass devastation around a target as well as on it. An aerial photograph of the Thanh Hoa Bridge after an attack in 1965 showed over 800 craters around the target.²⁵ Smart bombs soon did the job in one pass.

The naval aspects of the Operation are equally respectable. A full blockade of the coast and mining the ports of Haiphong, Cam Pha, Hon Gai and Thanh Hoa effectively stopped Soviet and Chinese arms from reaching the NVA and VC troops on the front, and received only mild opposition from the Chinese and Soviet governments.²⁶ Given the exposed communist troops and the new ability to accurately put rounds on target, it's very likely the war could have been won if the operation had continued.

Had they also attacked north over the 17th parallel, American forces could have almost certain victory. Without the aid of all America's technology, British boots on the ground were able to cut from New York down through the Southern colonies. South Vietnam had 1.1 million ARVN soldiers at the time of the Easter offensive, but they were unable to push back the North Vietnamese. There were also 95,000 better-trained and motivated American troops in South Vietnam, but only 6,000 of them were combat troops. The technology and the equipment was there, but they lacked enough men to follow up the job, not to mention the authority.

While the Americans were short on men, the British faced a shortage of technological advantages. Until French involvement in the American Revolution, the British maintained Naval superiority, but only tentatively. The Navy, an extremely expensive military branch, was in a state of disrepair not having received much aid after the Seven Year's war. It was thus unable to either blockade or effectively raid American ports for much of the conflict.

According to Dave Richard Palmer it is doubtful that such a blockade would have affected the Continental Army's will or ability to fight; English will would have been tested sooner: "For one thing, war with America was unpopular in England; victory had to be achieved surely and swiftly. For another, England itself was deep in debt; loss of the lucrative New World trade would hurt merchants at home as well as colonists abroad."²⁷ A blockade would have taken too long to achieve noticeable results, and time was of the essence.

Indeed, the key to American victory in the revolution lay in the coffers of the English government. The taxes that had provoked rebellion in the first place had been raised to pay for the debt amounting from the Seven Year's War with France. Another extensive, expensive North American conflict was the last thing that the British public wanted. Over the course of the American Revolution, taxes and duties within the British Isles were raised until 23% of per

capita income was taken in taxation and even that only covered 20% of the new, expanded costs. The rest had to be borrowed.²⁸

French and American naval forces also interfered with the economy as the French ran amok in the Caribbean where the Americans had promised them their share of the spoils of war and by American privateers. John Paul Jones terrorized the shores of England, and other American privateers made away with £18 million in prizes by the end of the war. The French Navy, which proved its tactical value at Yorktown, also helped drastically affect British shipping across the Atlantic²⁹

The British public was not opposed to the war against the colonists in general, but the increased financial burden made it difficult for Lord North, the man responsible for many of the tax increases as well as the Coercive Acts, and King George III to convince Parliament to continue the war. The Opposition Whig party used the war to weaken its rivals in Parliament by bashing the financial burdens of the conflict. Opposition papers railed against Lord North, and the radical *Evening Post* went so far as to call the American war “unnatural, unconstitutional, unnecessary, unjust, dangerous, hazardous and unprofitable.”³⁰

Increasing reports of defeats and financial strain so weakened the Tory position in parliament and government that when news of Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown reached London, followed soon by the Spanish and French capture of Minorca, the parliament said “enough”. Parliament even voted on March 4, 1782 to “consider as enemies to his majesty and the Country all those who should advise or by any means attempt to further prosecution of offensive war on the continent of North America,” overriding the King who wished to press on

A similar trap sprang on the United States government during its involvement in Vietnam. Though financial considerations were not a dire concern for the average American, perceived defeat or stalemate was a certain deal-breaker. Until 1968, many Americans believed they were winning the war. Body counts were always in favor of the Americans and the Army and Marines had never seen defeat in battle.³² The Tet Offensive changed all that.

The Vietcong seemed to spring out of nowhere on January 31, 1968 when they attacked Southern cities across the country. Hue quickly fell and sappers breached the wall of the American embassy in Saigon. The whole country was under attack, and the American public was aghast. Only weeks prior, General Westmoreland had made a speaking tour across the United States telling the public that the war was nearly won. The picture on their television screens seemed to say differently. Despite the positive military outcome for the United States as mentioned earlier in this paper, the American public viewed it as a horrendous loss. After he had returned from the battle America's own news anchor Walter Cronkite declared on February 17, 1968 that the Vietnam War would end in a stalemate. As Johnson surmised, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America."³³

Lost it, he had. The Tet Offensive was America's Yorktown and it sent the country on the same road the British had travelled before. General Vo Nguyen Giap had seen the victory coming, but he had not know the terms: "We'll beat them at the moment when they have the most men, the most arms, and the greatest hope of winning."³⁴ It wasn't a decisive loss, or even a loss at all, but it convinced the public that the continuation of the war would be futile. Unlike the British Parliament, which refused to continue to support the war, Congress continued to pay for it, albeit with much grumbling. The grumbings inside the Capital were joined with the howls of the public, and it was not long before the Presidency was forced to react. Richard Nixon came

into office pledging “Vietnamization” of the war, and by the time the United States had a chance to win again during the Easter Offense in 1972, it had no more political capital to use up. Nixon withdrew US forces, and by 1975 the South had been overrun.

Two of history’s greatest nations lost their wars against smaller, weaker colonial powers, not necessarily because they were thoroughly vanquished in the field of battle, but because their governments could no longer support the wars financially or politically. For the British, the defeat at Yorktown did not have to be the final battle. The king and Parliament combined had the ability to raise another army, but the strain on their funds combined with increased actions in other theaters had raised enough dissent amongst Parliament to stop any return campaigns in North America.

It did not have to end the same for the United States in Vietnam. The lessons were there for anybody who bothered to read and apply them, but no one did. Instead of engaging the native population in determining their own future and treating them with respect as the British did, the Americans herded them into pens. Rather than either actively pursuing the communists in their own Northern strongholds, they attempted to reach them only with bombing campaigns. Once the enemy was lured out and engaged in open battle, the United States fell on its haunches instead of destroying him while it had the chance. Like the British, the United States let its enemy evade at all the wrong times and tried to engage at the worst. There were an overwhelming number of factors that corresponded to the American Revolution, and yet they never drew the comparison.

Eventually, like the British, these same factors ultimately added up to a political resistance to the war until the point where America could no longer continue to fight, even when she had the upper hand. As Great Britain did 190 years before them, the Americans pulled

chicks and left Vietnam to its fate. And as they left, the thought must have crossed their minds.

“We should have known.”

Foot Notes

¹ Howard H. Pecham, *The War for Independence: A Military History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 12.

² James S. Olson, Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: American and Vietnam, 1945-1995* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 91.

³ David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, eds., *Civilians in Wartime Early America: From the Colonial Era to the Civil War*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 199.

⁴ Heidler, 37.

⁵ Olson, 108, 91.

⁶ Olson, 154

⁷ Olson, 91

⁸ Heidler, 48

⁹ Olson, 135

¹⁰ Olson, 45

¹¹ Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12.

¹² Dave Richard Palmer, *The Way of the Fox: American Strategy in the War for America 1775-1783*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), 39

¹³ Olson, 78.

¹⁴ Jeffrey S. Milstein, *Dynamics of the Vietnam War: A Quantitative Analysis and Predictive Computer Simulation*, (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1974), 43.

¹⁵ Cathal Nolan, "Vietnam" (lecture, Boston University, Boston, MA, December 2, 2008).

¹⁶ Olson, 151

¹⁷ Nolan, "Tet Offensive"

¹⁸ Palmer, 122

¹⁹ Cathal Nolan, "Tet Offensive" (lecture, Boston University, Boston, MA, December 4, 2008).

²⁰ Palmer, 133-134

²¹ Palmer, 39

²² Olson, 89

²³ Olson, 135

²⁴ Olson, 233-234

²⁵ Paul G. Gillespie, "The ultimate weapon: precision-guided munitions have changed the modern battlefield, and in the process created a new American way of war," *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 20, no. 2 (Winter 2008), <http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/>

²⁶ Olson, 231-232

²⁷ Palmer, 40

²⁸ Conway, 53-54

²⁹ Conway, 47-48

³⁰ Solomon Lutnick, *The American Revolution and the British Press, 1775-1783* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1967), 59.

³¹ Peckham, 189

³² Nolan, "Tet Offensive"

³³ Daly, Chris, "Vietnam" (lecture, Boston University, Boston, MA, December 9, 2008).

³⁴ Olson, 167

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