

MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MASSACHUSETTS

ROTC Essay Competition Topic:

TWO WARS OF INDEPENDENCE

September 23, 2009

BACKGROUND

I. AMERICA

Following the close of the French and Indian War in 1763, there had begun a steady drift toward conflict between Great Britain and its American colonies. The war had left Great Britain with a heavy debt, and Parliament felt it proper that Americans should share in the cost of maintaining a sizeable post-war British army in the colonies.

However, from the beginning of English settlement in North America the colonies had enjoyed a large measure of self-government, and the colonists regarded taxation imposed from abroad with resentment and suspicion, as the start of an effort to deprive them of their traditional freedoms. Over time, resistance grew, with one incident leading to another, until finally the shedding of blood at Concord and Lexington in 1775 marked the onset of an eight –year war for which neither side was prepared. Great Britain, then the world’s mightiest power, found itself confronting rebels who lacked a government, let alone an organized and trained military force. Ironically, the opponents in this war, for the most part, were members of the same family, sharing the same historical, cultural, religious and linguistic heritage.

II. VIETNAM

Roughly two hundred years later, following World War II, the French confronted an independence movement in Vietnam, a part of France’s Indochina colonies. In 1954, following a disastrous defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the French withdrew from Vietnam, leaving behind two states: North Vietnam, governed by the communist forces that had defeated the French, and South Vietnam, a non-communist, hopefully democratic state. (These two states were the result of the 1954 Geneva Conference between France and the Viet Minh, the communist government of North Vietnam.) It was apparent from the start that U.S. economic and diplomatic aid were crucial to the survival of South Vietnam, and it was not long before a determination was made that direct military assistance was needed.

Thus the United States, now the world’s mightiest power, took the place of the former colonial regime, and found itself in what was to be a ten-year conflict (1965-1975) on the opposing side of a war of independence. America’s opponents (and Vietnamese allies) in this war shared few if any of our traditions and beliefs, and our mutually incomprehensible languages were a barrier to communications with the country’s population.

PURPOSE AND CONTENT OF THE ESSAY

You are asked to compare and contrast these two wars. What were their similarities and dissimilarities? In responding to this question you are asked to comment on the following:

What was the impact of modern military professionalism and technology in the two wars? Did British training, experience and material resources on land and sea make a critical difference in the outcome of the American Revolution? Similarly, did American military experience, together with naval, land and air superiority, make a critical difference in the outcome of the Vietnam War?

Given the military, technological and economic disparities between the contestants, what were the factors that account for the ultimate victories of the Americans in the Revolutionary War and the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong in the Vietnam War?

How did the sharing of a common heritage with the civilian population of the thirteen colonies, and the existence of a sizeable loyalist presence, affect British strategy and tactics? How did these factors affect the war's outcome?

Similarly, how did the lack of any such relationship or familiarity between the peoples of America and Vietnam, and the need for the U.S. to work in harmony with the government of South Vietnam, affect the outcome of a war generally regarded, on the American side, as a contest between communism and democracy?

To what extent did political and financial considerations at home (in Britain and the U.S.) affect the conduct and the outcomes of the two wars?

Finally, confronted with the prospect of intervening in Vietnam, what lessons might U.S. military and political leaders have drawn from the experience of the British in the Revolutionary War?