

# Hard-Learned Lessons In a Military Laboratory

Now our great responsibility is to be the chief defender of freedom in this time of maximum danger. Only the United States has the power and the resources and the determination.

—President Kennedy, April 28, 1961, in Chicago.

By George C. Wilson

Washington Post Staff Writer

President Kennedy set out that world policeman role for the United States while decrying the terror tactics of "a small army of guerrillas, organized and sustained by the Communist Vietminh in the North . . ."

He had just been through the humbling experience of the Bay of Pigs where an underpowered invasion force had been repulsed by Cuban defenders. He was receptive to better ideas for combating "national wars of liberation."

Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, the former Army chief of staff who had written a book, "The Uncertain Trumpet," urging more emphasis on conventional fighting forces, was one of those eager to advise the young President.

With the help of Taylor and others, Kennedy steeped himself in the technicalities of so-called "limited" war.

The new President familiarized himself with the guerrilla warfare doctrine of Mao Tse-tung. He encouraged elitism in the form of Army Green Berets and other special U.S. military units for limited war, and took a deeper plunge into Vietnam than his predecessor by writing President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam on Dec. 15, 1961, that "we shall seek to persuade the Communists to give up their attempts of force and subversion."

Those words—repeated in other ways by President Kennedy's lieutenants (Secretary of State Dean Rusk, for example, said the object was to get the Communists "to leave their neighbors alone")—came to be the fuzzy objective of the Vietnam war, for want of a clearer one.

But there was never a clear military objective. World War II had "unconditional surrender" of Germany, Japan and their allies for an objective. The goal in the Korean War was restoration of the natural boundary of the 38th Parallel for dividing North and South Korea. But Vietnam in 1961 was fighting a civil war. The Vietcong was made up largely of South Vietnamese who ran the political, economic and military affairs of hundreds of hamlets in their own country. The Vietcong leaders and their followers felt no allegiance to Saigon or any of the bureaucrats who sat there. Ho Chi Minh of North Vietnam was the picture often seen in the huts. He was the recognized patriot who had pushed out the foreign invaders.

## Orders Unclear

Consequently, the American expeditionary force that Presidents Kennedy and then Johnson ordered to Vietnam had no clear marching orders as it left the United States by jet plane nor received any hero's welcome when it arrived in Vietnam as the successor to the French troops.

Because Presidents Kennedy and Johnson portrayed Vietnam as a little war that the United States could help fight with its left hand, the military leaders felt compelled to shape their own efforts that way. The record fails to show any member of the often-troubled Joint Chiefs of Staff who refused to commit his men to a half-war. The chiefs went along.

This political background must be kept in mind as one assesses Vietnam as a laboratory for military lessons learned. The lack of any clear military objective; the failure to declare war or to mobilize for it; the lack of any moral imperative at home to support spiritually the troops fighting the war abroad, and the very length of the war all point to the biggest lesson of all: The United States cannot successfully fight that way. Its people demand

Enemy sanctuaries: They frustrated U.S. efforts by air, land and sea to cordon off the battlefield.

Gadgets: Proved a mixed blessing.

Training: The United States military, language barrier notwithstanding, can transform an Asian militia in its own image.

Eloquent testimony on how air power and pacification can work at cross-purposes came in 1972 from one of the thousands of dispossessed South Vietnamese. He was a middle-aged, onetime rice farmer living in a tin shack among the thousands of refugees thrown together like flotsam of the war on Danang's Red Beach.

"Insecurity," he said, "means that there are two sides, and I'm in the middle and I must get out. I have moved 20 times since 1948 and built 14 different houses in that time. Every time a government military outpost moves into my area to protect me, I know there is going to be a fight and that I will have to move.

"In the old days," this victim of the Vietminh to American battles said, "when the French and Vietminh fought, I had more time. I could hide my family in the woods outside the village for a few days, then return.

"People could still make a living in those days. They could go back to their fields. That was before the Americans came with their bombs. Now the bombs fall from the mountains to the sea. If you stay in your village, you die."

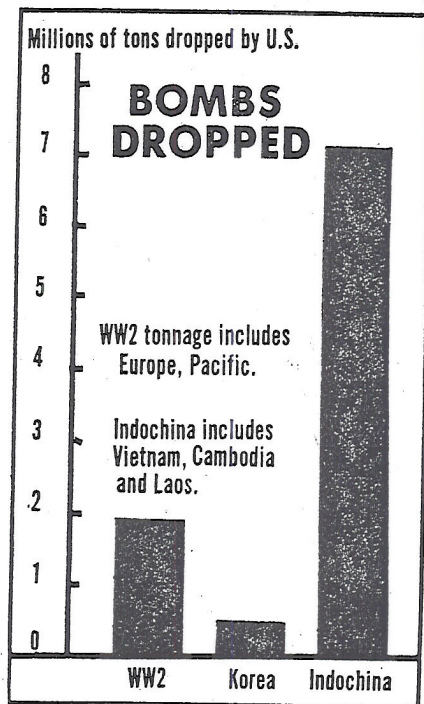
The Air Force and Navy tried extensive bombing in two different campaigns in an attempt to keep ammunition, food and guns, out of the hands of Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops fighting in South Vietnam.

Under President Johnson, the bombing campaign was called Rolling Thunder and under President Nixon, Operation Linebacker.

Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, former Air Force chief of staff; Adm. U. S. G. Sharp, former commander of Pacific forces, and other military leaders argued early in the war that an all-out bombing campaign should be launched to force North Vietnam to surrender. Former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara dissented, arguing that no amount of bombing would stop infiltration or force Hanoi to the conference table. His advice—which prevailed in the early 1960s—was to bomb with restraint; to use bombing gradually in what became known as the "eye-dropper" strategy of increasing the military pressure against the North.

President Nixon, after Hanoi invaded South Vietnam last Easter weekend, not only authorized intensive bombing of North Vietnam's military traffic and facilities but also sealed off the ports with mines.

Although North Vietnam's supplies still got through by truck from China, across North Vietnam and into South Vietnam, Air Force leaders argue that the blockade-bombing combination put a crimp in the enemy's Easter offensive.



The Washington Post

clear objectives; good guys and bad guys; victory or defeat.

That may be the overall lesson of Vietnam. Several more specialized ones stand out:

**Air power:** It hurt pacification—the effort to win "the hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese people. It reduced but did not stop infiltration of enemy troops and supplies. It showed great potential as flying artillery, and increased the mobility of American forces.

**Guerrilla tactics:** They were not given a full field test—and probably never will be unless the United States itself is attacked—because commanders did not want to be blamed for suffering high casualties.

**Manpower:** Relying on the draft rather than activating reservists—plus imposing a one-year tour for draftees and short, ticket-punching assignments for officers—nearly wrecked the army.

More certain than the impact of bombing on infiltration is the contribution tactical air support made in the ground war in Vietnam. No American battalion was ever surrounded and lost during the Vietnam war, partly because B-52s, fighter-bombers and gunships were available to break the siege.

Khesanh, the outpost on the western end of the Demilitarized Zone where 5,000 Marines took a stand against an enemy entrenched all around them, was the most dramatic demonstration of what air power could do in this regard. The bombers turned the rolling woodland around Khesanh into a moonscape of craters, many of them as large as backyard swimming pools. Hundreds of enemy troops were blown up inside their bunkers by these ferocious attacks from the air.

Less dramatic, but still crucial, was the "flying artillery" which went to the aid of isolated positions on hilltops in the jungled north end of South Vietnam or inside the barbed wire doughnuts of the Delta. Gunships — transports like the C-47 and C-130 armed with Gatling-type cannon—got their first test in Vietnam. They proved a lethal weapon as they spit out streams of shells on enemy troops or trucks, night or day. The transports were a slow, but steady, platform for the weapons on board.

And probably the biggest surprise of all was how effective B-52s — designed to carry nuclear bombs to Russia — could be in blowing up acres of landscape and anything living on it. One B-52, rigged up for the iron bombs of conventional war, could drop 30 tons of explosive from seven miles up in the sky. Air Force leaders stress that Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, when he was field commander in Vietnam, said the B-52s had a punch equivalent to two divisions of soldiers.

### Lessons on Mobility

As for mobility, C-141 cargo jets proved reliable workhorses for carrying vital items, like spare parts, from the continental U.S. warehouse to Vietnam. Inside Vietnam itself, the Army and Marine Corps learned a whole book of lessons about mobility.

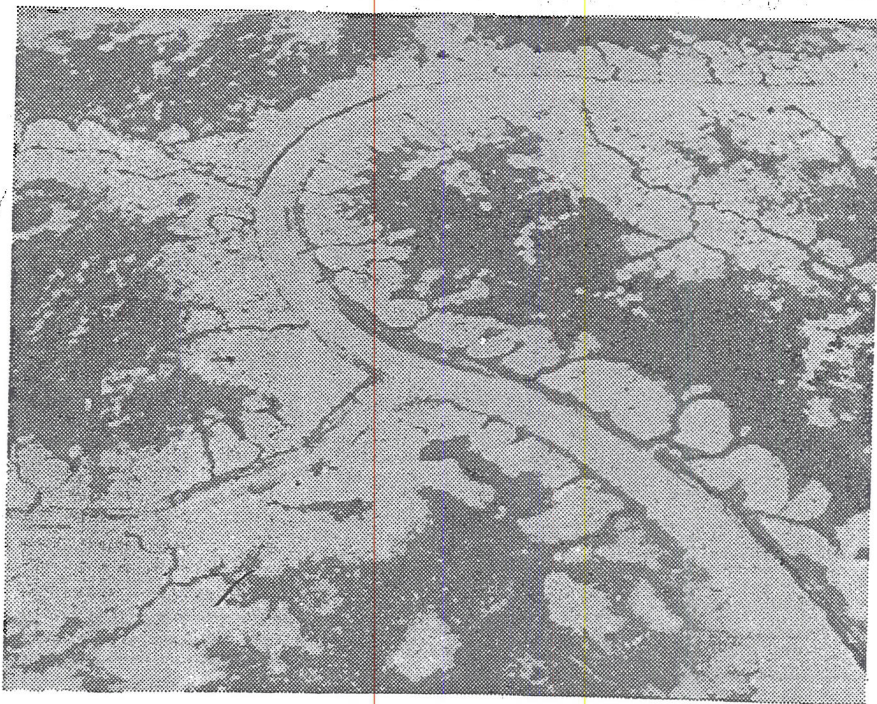
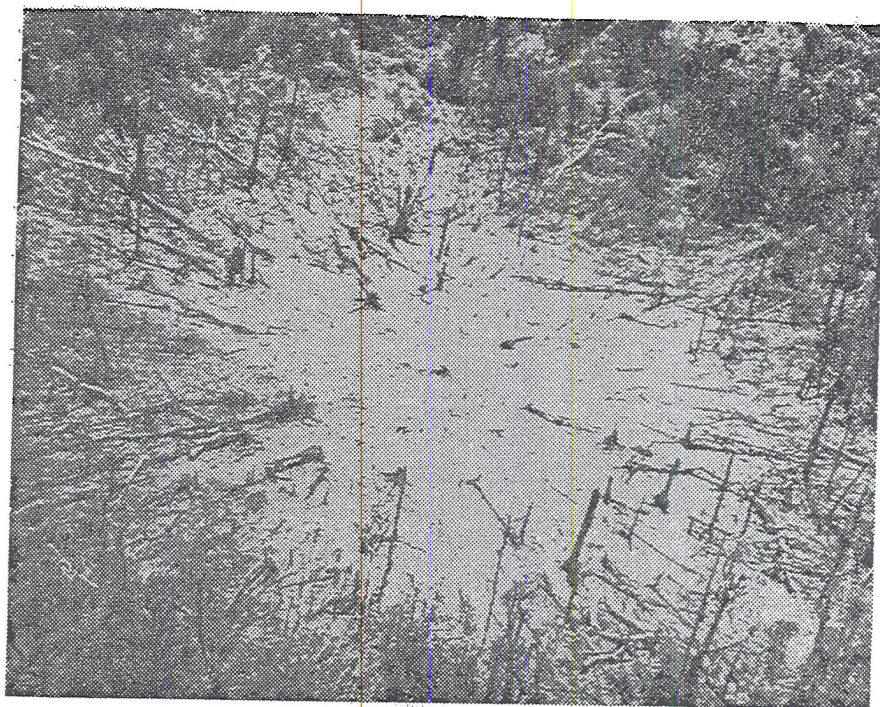
Said one Army general specializing in combat weapons when asked what was the biggest single lesson out of the Vietnam war. "The helicopter. It showed us how commanders could command the battle."

Besides enabling battalion, brigade and division commanders to take a balcony seat and look down on a battle to determine how it was going and where reinforcements were needed most, the helicopter put wings on the infantryman, on the artillery guns, and on the pallets of supplies.

True, the helicopter was used in the Korean War. But there were not enough on hand to marry helicopters and infantrymen within the division. The Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division, for example, had over 400 helicopters at its disposal in Vietnam. UH-1 Hueys took a squad of infantrymen to a hilltop to take the high ground; heavier CH-47 Chinooks trucked supplies to the troopers—everything from ammunition to beer, and fast-firing Cobras helped protect them.

Helicopters, in short, showed how commanders could cover wide areas with a few troops by probing for the enemy and then reinforcing when he was found; how isolated bases could live on aerial supply, and how a comparatively delicate machine armed with the right missile could knock out a heavily armored tank.

The U.S. Marine Corps was slow to learn the lessons about helicopter mobility. It went into the Vietnam War with only a few, old helicopters and settled for slogging up hills Korean War style, not landing on top of the hills by assault helicopters. One result, it seems fair to say, was more casualties than the corps needed to take in Vietnam.



Photos by United Press International and Associated Press

*Blasted landing zone and defoliated trails: Ravaging the land to deny it to the enemy raised a question of values.*

As one Marine Corps colonel with two combat tours in Vietnam put it: "The Marine Corps, unlike the other services, never as an institution put its mind to the Vietnam war. It kept thinking of its amphibious mission of landing on beaches with assault troops, even though two-thirds of all its combat units were in Vietnam."

Now that the Marines are out of Vietnam, one nagging question in the minds of many young officers is whether the corps will learn the mobility lessons of Vietnam or forget the whole experience as if it were a bad dream.

Under firepower, any number of excesses could be listed: free fire zones, H&I (harassing and interdiction), reconnaissance by fire.

But one straightforward set of statistics makes the point that the United States blew up far too much countryside to fulfill its mission of winning the hearts and minds of the people:

From 1966 through August, 1972, the U.S. dropped 6.7 million tons of explosives from airplanes on both Vietnams, Cambodia and Laos. That is much more than the total dropped in World

War II and works out to 289 pounds of explosive for every man, woman and child living in the four nations of Indochina.

Any number of studies in the early 1960s showed that the Vietcong controlled the countryside by night. Logically, then, U.S. forces had to out-guerrilla the Communist guerrillas to win the country for the Saigon government. That was the theory, anyhow. The reality, though, was quite different.

"I could send my people out at night," an Army battalion commander told this reporter right after the Tet offensive of 1968. "But they might get clobbered. And if I take a lot of casualties, Division will have my ass. They can tell you they want us to go out at night. But nobody really wants to take on that risk."

Vietnam, remember, was a war whose progress was measured by statistics like enemy "body counts" and weapons captured instead of by arrows and flags on a map as in World War II. U.S. policy-makers in Washington winced at American casualties, realizing the people would not support their Vietnam policies if the war became too bloody to no apparent end. President Nixon realized this. He immediately turned the war over to the South Vietnamese, especially the combat, as fast as he could under the program called "Vietnamization."

The draft caused havoc in the Army. Experienced reservists (except a few called up after the USS Pueblo was captured) were not activated to fill the gaps as the Army expanded. Instead, a wholesale process of robbing Peter to pay Paul took place as officers and sergeants were yanked out of European and stateside billets to fill slots in Vietnam. The going and coming made for a gigantic personnel mess.

"Six years of war—and this has been the longest war in our history other than our War of Independence—has truly stretched the Army almost to its elastic limit," said Gen. William C. Westmoreland, former Army chief of staff, in an interview with The Post. "It has been a very traumatic experience for us."

"We had to lower our standards to provide the officers and non-commissioned officers to man this Army because the reserves were not called up. We didn't have the infusion of officers from civilian life that we've had in past wars. So therefore we had to lower our standards to meet the requirements in numbers."

Maj. Gen. O.C. Talbott, commander of Ft. Benning, Ga.—home of the U.S. Army Infantry — said the following when asked if the lessons learned in Vietnam had been worth the price the Army paid for them:

"Certainly in the tactical sense, in the experience sense, we've got more field experience, tactical experience, command experience in the U.S. Army than we have had since the Civil War

—more than any other country in the world has. In that sense, there has been a fantastic plus.

"From the doctrine standpoint, it has sort of shaken up the thinking and made people take new approaches. In those senses, it has been good.

"In the sense of the impact that we are a reflection of our society and the antiwar feelings on it, of course that's on the negative side.

"In the long run, our Army cannot exist without the good will of the people. Draft or no draft, volunteer or not volunteer, it just cannot exist because it is the people themselves who are coming to it. They will come to it bit-

terly and with distaste, or with pride and willingness to perform — based upon the national attitude of the people as a whole. And that has to be wrapped in. It is not a simple military question."

If there is a next time, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird and others in the military establishment, the reserves will be activated and sent to war before draftees are called.

The ticket-punching represented by changing battalion commanders every six months in Vietnam to give a large number of officers command experience in combat cost casualties, according to a study of the Pentagon's old Office of Systems Analyses.

The emphasis now that the war is over is on keeping officers in one place for a year or more so they can get to know their men well.

Abrams, while field commander in Vietnam, decried the fact that the Americal Division had gone through five chiefs of staff in one year. Army leaders contend it is essential that officers and sergeants stay around long enough to build stability in a unit to learn its strengths and weaknesses.

Turnover, frustration at not being

able to find the enemy and lack of accountability in the chain of command all were dramatized when the My Lai massacre of 1968 came to light despite efforts by field officers of the Americal Division to keep it secret. Lt. William L. Calley Jr., a platoon leader in Charlie Company of Task Force Barker, was sentenced to life imprisonment for murdering 22 villagers in My Lai. His company on March 16, 1968, herded hundreds of unarmed villagers into a ditch and shot them to death.

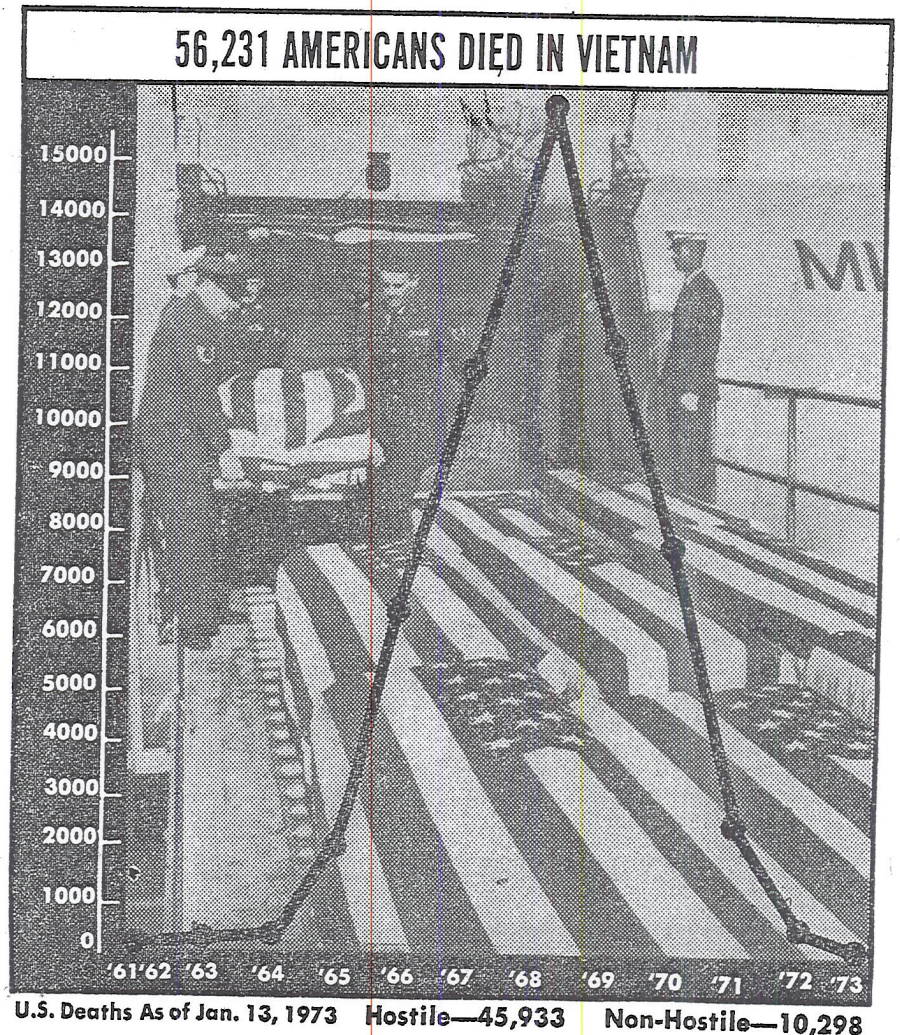
Unlike Korea—a peninsula-like country surrounded on every border except the northern one by sea—South Vietnam had enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos all along its western front. No amount of bombing, nor of sweeps by infantrymen, managed to stop the leaks of enemy troops and supplies from the sanctuaries. The lesson here is the futility of trying to pacify a country with open borders. "All I'm doing," complained a U.S. Army colonel holding down a position near the Cambodian border in 1968, "is buying time with my boys for the politicians to settle this thing." His point was that there was no way to "win" when the Vietnam rear was open to the enemy.

### "Gimmicks, Gadgets"

Because the United States believes that the life of the soldier should be guarded with as much firepower and gadgetry as can be brought to bear, Vietnam was a laboratory for rifle scopes that enabled the soldier to see at night by starlight; for laser beams that guided bombs to target, and for all kinds of electronic boxes aboard aircraft to foil enemy defenses. Also, sensors for detecting enemy troops mechanically went to war in a big way.

The results of the battlefield tests are being analyzed, with some military leaders predicting that the generals of the future will run battles sitting at consoles. Satellites, computers, people sniffers, sensors which broadcast what they hear—that will be part of the force of iron soldiers in the future.

Col. David H. Hackworth, a retired colonel who received a number of battlefield medals in Vietnam, is one of those who contends the Army fielded inferior weapons in Vietnam and is going overboard on gadgetry.



"As I see it," wrote Hackworth in the June issue of Popular Mechanics, "in Vietnam our country has tried to kill a fly with a sledgehammer—a sledgehammer made of gimmicks and gadgets. We have tried to wear down the enemy by a massive outpouring of bombs, bullets and material from the nation's great assembly lines . . . Over-reliance on electronics cost the lives of 33 American soldiers and wounds to 76 others in March, 1971 when Vietnam sappers infiltrated a firebase of the Americal Division. The small radars and sensors protecting the Americal firebase were of no help."

One big lesson of the war, in Hackworth's view, is that gadgetry often proves more trouble than it is worth. But, for better or for worse, the American military has trained the South Vietnamese air force, army and—to a lesser extent—navy in its own image, gadgetry and all. Vietnamization proved this could be done. President Thieu told The Post that the helicopter was more of a disadvantage than advantage because infantrymen did not want to walk anymore. The other lessons as we leave the struggle almost entirely to the South Vietnamese are still to be learned. □

## Cost in Dollars and Men

Fiscal Year	Full Costs (Millions)	Incremental Costs (Millions)	U.S. forces South Vietnam year-end	U.S. forces in S'the't Asia outside South Vietnam
1965	\$ 103	\$ 103	59,900	42,900
1966	5,812	5,812	267,500	54,200
1967	20,133	18,417	448,800	80,300
1968	26,547	20,012	534,700	87,400
1969	28,805	21,544	538,700	82,900
1970	23,052	17,373	414,900	57,200
1971	14,719	11,542	239,200	48,200
1972	9,261	7,346	48,005	84,700

\*budget estimate †as of Nov. 30, 1972

(Full costs cover all forces, including the additional personnel, aircraft, operations, munitions used and equipment lost in the Southeast Asia conflict. Incremental costs represent the additional costs of fighting the war over the normal costs of operating the same forces in peacetime. As explained by the Pentagon, all ammunition consumed in the Southeast Asia theater is included under full costs. For example, incremental costs represent only the difference between the total amount of ammunition consumed in combat operations, according to the Pentagon, and the amount that would be consumed in peacetime.)