

# Lessons of War: Vietnam Spurs a

## Armed Services Stress Importance of Politics

By DREW MIDDLETON

The Vietnam war has destroyed many of the armed forces' illusions while stimulating a wide re-examination of doctrine and tactics.

According to scores of officers and noncommissioned officers interviewed recently, the services' experience has made them more conscious of their role in contemporary America and their relations with the civilian world, especially the media.

Traditional practice, as epitomized by Dwight D. Eisenhower, rigidly opposed the introduction of international politics into planning and operations, and enforced this on a generation of officers.

But politics affected almost every operation in Vietnam from the seizure of a village to the launching of major ground and air offensives, and the services have drawn the lesson.

In staff schools and in an operational planning at the Pentagon, far more attention is paid now than in the past to the political implications of even the smallest overseas activities.

Meanwhile, strictly military questions of strategy, tactics and weapons are under microscopic examination. The object is to include the war's experience in planning and training without falling into the classic error of preparing to fight the last war all over again.

### Defensive and Critical

Service attitudes to the war are at once defensive and critical. In some respects the military are tougher about their performance than their critics.

Prof. Roger A. Beaumont, writing in *Military Review*, published by the Army's Command and General Staff College, said:

"Vietnam, after all, had no clear objective; a hesitant approach to the offensive; tangled plans and support priorities; split command due to concern for the Vietnamese political milieu; dispersion of manpower and logistical support; ponderous tactics usually devoid of surprise, and leaky security.

Such criticism is balanced by service convictions that they fought the war under severe, unwise inhibitions.

Officers are certain that the war could have been won if the military had been allowed to fight it without the restrictions imposed by the White House during the Johnson Administration.

Resentment and suspicion of antiwar politicians and the media, though strongest in the Army, runs through all of the services.

The former are arraigned as ignorant of the war and as encouraging through their speeches dereliction of duty, desertion and protest. The latter are held responsible for an inaccurate, biased picture that stressed the negative aspects of the conflict.

### Faith in Bombing Unshaken

Whatever the misgivings of individual officers, the Air Force and Navy believe Hanoi was brought to realistic negotiation by the bombing and mining of North Vietnam. It began on May 8 and that the renewal of bombing, after the breakdown of negotiations in December, coerced the North into a return to the conference table.

The Army, with few successes to claim, and those hard-won and uncelebrated, emerges from the war less certain of the war's lessons than the other services. Sweeping reviews of tactics and weapons are being carried out in staff college classrooms and in bull sessions among Vietnam veterans.

Tanks were not a decisive factor in a war fought over difficult terrain against a mobile enemy averse, until Gen. V. Nguyen Gian's unsuccessful offensive in 1972, to conventional warfare.

As a result many young officers doubt the tank's usefulness in brush-fire wars and see it confined to a general war, where its effectiveness may be further restricted by new infantry and air-borne missiles and cheap area weapons.

Although the Army accepts the helicopter's usefulness on the evidence of Vietnam, there is wide and sharp debate over what this means for the future.

Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the former commander of United States forces in Vietnam and Army Chief of Staff, believes the helicopter will play a major role in any future war, both as a means of transport and as a weapon platform against tanks and infantry.

An important element in TRICAP, the Army's experimental triple capability division now training at Fort Hood, Tex., is a helicopter unit armed and trained to fight tanks.

### Reservations About Choppers

Other officers, however, have strong reservations about the helicopter as an antitank weapon in a conventional war. They do not believe it would survive in "a sky full of Migs."

But the helicopter as a means of transport in a guerrilla war fought over rough terrain with inadequate roads gets an almost unanimous vote of approval.

The effectiveness in guerrilla wars of heavy, complicated infantry equipment, such as big mortars and machineguns, is now questioned by many officers and noncoms. They urge

light, simple weapons and simplicity and flexibility in tactics against a highly mobile enemy.

The advent of the electronic battlefield, with sensors and other detection devices gathering information and computers recording and assimilating data from the field, was promoted by experimentation in Vietnam. Here, too, earlier enthusiasm is dampened by methodical examination of performance and potential.

The Army has plenty of tough pragmatists who are suspicious of the accuracy of information gathered by sensors. You may save men on reconnaissance by the use of sensors, they argue, only to lose them if the electronic information is inaccurate.

The Special Forces played an important role in the opening phases of the Vietnam war but their importance diminished when the war of the big battalions began. The Special Forces were the glamorous but costly Green Beret units who ranged the swiftly changing fronts and engaged in sabotage, raids and demolitions.

### Role in 'Nation Building'

Another of their functions, now widely copied through the Army, was "nation building," teaching the Vietnamese to improve such conditions as agriculture and sanitation and giving them instruction in how to fight the Vietcong.

Today, with many officers convinced that the future holds more guerrilla wars rather than major conventional wars, the place of the Special Forces in future operations is being upgraded.

More attention is paid to their early cooperation with local allies and their intensive training in counterinsurgency techniques. One lesson drawn by many officers is that Vietnamization should have begun much earlier for both regular and irregular forces and that the process of turning over command and control to Vietnamese commanders should have been accelerated.

The Army and Marine Corps learned anew the importance of individual initiative and small-unit operations. Many young officers argue that even in a major war, units no larger than a battalion will be the primary operational formation. American training, they hope, will take into account the possibility of a period of "broken-backed" warfare after a nuclear exchange in which only small units would be viable.

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## Sweeping Review of

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## Tactics and Weapons

Young officers studying the lessons of the war are aware of the danger of sanctifying them as doctrine. The war, they say, was not fought by "the book" except at higher headquarters because the book was concerned primarily with fighting the Russians in Germany.

#### Airmen Feel Vindicated

The air arm, the Air Force and the Navy's carrier squadrons, emerged from the war confident that their weapons and tactics had been vindicated despite American and international complaints over bombing. As evidence they cite Operation Linebacker, the offensive launched against the North last May, and the series of attacks on Hanoi and Haiphong in December.

In that offensive, generals and admirals assert, they were allowed for the first time to amount a systematic, sustained attack against the enemy's key industrial and infrastructure targets.

Air power is credited, in the Pentagon, with destroying and damaging more than 75 railroad bridges, cutting all four rail lines between China and North Vietnam, destroying 10 per cent of the country's trucks, six major thermal power plants, many warehouses and war factories and 20 per cent of the storage facilities for gasoline, oil and lubricants.

A detailed assessment of the damage inflicted during the December raids has not yet been made public.

In sum, the Air Force contends its weapons systems, including the new laser bomb aids and the so-called "smart" bombs, paid off in war against an enemy whose industrial base and communications were strongly defended even by European standards.

Losses, especially in the final phase over Hanoi and Haiphong, were serious but not such as to force any reconsideration of tactics, air officers say.

They point out, however, that the losses were due almost entirely to only one form of defense, surface-to-air missiles.

What, they ask, would have been the loss rate had the enemy deployed modern interceptors with highly trained pilots against the B-52's?

#### 'Career Admirals' View

The Navy experience, centered on the carrier strike force in the Gulf of Tonkin, confirmed the views of the "carrier admirals," who see the aircraft carrier as the most effective weapon to protect American power and, hence, indispensable to the Navy's key role under the Nixon Doctrine.

Navy iconoclasts argue, however, that the carriers operated in unusual circumstances, without the threat of hostile submarines with torpedoes and guided missiles and few fast, powerfully armed torpedo boats. The Navy, they warn, should not draw permanent conclusions from the carriers' suc-

cess in what was an unnatural environment for naval warfare.

There is also a body of naval opinion that urges greater study of riverine warfare and other close support tactics. They argue that surface ships, not carrier, enforced the blockade of North Vietnam and sunk a high percentage of the 1,800 shallow draft craft claimed since last April.

Adm. Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr., Chief of Naval Operations, believes that surface ships forced North Vietnam early in the war to abandon supply of its forces by trawler and sampan and to use the Ho Chi Minh trail instead of the sea.

Consequently, he argued, sea

power had a major impact on enemy strategic planning, forcing North Vietnam to use slower transport of less capacity. The admiral is also convinced that the Navy must be better prepared for riverine warfare in the future and must maintain ships and personnel for such operations.

State and Defense Department officials have compared the military experience in Vietnam to that gained by the Germans and Italians, and to a lesser extent the Russians, during the Spanish Civil War of the thirties.

American military men agree to a certain extent. The war gave a generation of young

American officers experience in combat operations at sea, on the ground and in the air. It enabled the services to test weapons under combat conditions. It stimulated thinking on the conquest of problems in the field of command and control in an electronic era.

"The Russians learned something, too," a senior air general said not long ago. "They know what the SAM's can and can't do. They learned something about what air power can do to their tanks. They learned at Khe Sanh, at, oh, hell, a lot of places, that our kids are pretty damn good when the chips are down. Maybe they'll think twice the next time."