

THE BUNGLERS' WAR

Edmund Stillman

The belated dismissal of murder charges against the eight Special Forces personnel in Vietnam throws into glaring relief what has been the least noticed aspect of an utterly regrettable war — the general incompetence of those charged with achieving that *fata morgana*, victory, or even a tolerable peace.

The scandal itself will, no doubt, have been all but forgotten by the time these words appear, though leaving, to be sure, a residue of heightened mistrust of an Administration which could not foresee the public consequences of its actions, misjudged its own courage, and was guilty, moreover, of intolerable hypocrisy. Not to understand that the very climate of Vietnam, the violence, the suspicion, the tangled intrigues joining Americans to South Vietnamese, produced the casual murder of a double agent is to understand nothing at all of the consequences of the American intervention in this luckless corner of the world.

Well, peace to the victim, whatever his sins. He was only one of literally thousands who have died by stealth in Vietnam. And if by exposing the fact that Vietnam is the bunglers' war, his death — unlike so many others — will have counted for something at least.

The American public has long since come to terms with the notion that the war in Vietnam was *ab initio* an error, an exercise in futility and waste, in support of an unworthy government whom most Americans, on signal from the White House, are instantly prepared to dislike. A good many Americans have even found themselves capable of admitting the immorality of that war — on the general grounds that any war is bad except a defensive one, or more specifically that the United States has compounded the agony of the Vietnamese people by intervening in an internecine struggle, whose issues are obscure, in massive and indiscriminately lethal ways.

But most Americans, of the Left and the Right, have not seized on the issue of competence. For the

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diehards, those who would still "win" the war, the trouble lies in the constraints that are imposed on the military; there are too many restrictions; we ought to fight to win, not lose. The Left, the anti-war protestors, are also bemused by the spectre of American power — conceived as deadly, all-destroying — and conjure up an image of the Vietnamese countryside lying in ruins, something resembling the Ruhr or Osaka in 1945.

Neither belief is true.

Those who believe that the Army ought to "take the wraps off" do not really know what that policy would mean in fact. The bitter truth is that the American Army has had nearly five years and nearly unlimited fire power with which to win its war — and a half million men. If the disheartened Army officer corps now blames the policy of incrementalism, the deliberate pace of escalation giving the enemy time to accustom himself to our methods, it still remains true that no military commander, now or previously serving in Vietnam, seriously believed that so large a force of Americans would be needed at any time.

The vain belief always ruled in the Pentagon and at General Westmoreland's headquarters in Saigon that the "first team" would quickly smash the Viet Cong and the Army of North Vietnam (N.V.A.) — that, at most, only a few thousand more men would suffice to do the trick. (I know from personal recollection that suggesting to Pentagon personnel in 1965 that half a million men would *not* win the war invariably earned for me the shocked glance that evidenced that I had failed an instant test for sanity.)

Yet every evidence of the war points to the fact that *these* generals, *these* colonels would not begin to know what to do were we ever so foolish as to let them loose. General S. L. A. Marshall has written incessantly in support of the war; but I defy anyone to read a book like his *Battles in the Monsoon* and come away with anything but a dispirited conviction that all that has saved the American Army in battle after battle with the enemy has been the massive artillery and air support which, only minutes after the frequently disastrous meeting engagement, comes into deadly play and redeems earlier errors.

On the tactical level, the American unit has, as often as not, been beaten in the opening minutes. Any junior grade officer back from the "boonies" will,

likely as not, tell you as much after a few drinks in a Saigon bar. Asked to rate the tactical abilities of his juniors, an American General could only mutter "Fair to good" — the words hanging like a pall over the dinner table, damping down the usual exchange of slightly uncertain good news, good indices, which is the ritual of the Saigon military dinner party. And the military skills do not improve, it seems, as one moves up the military ladder from field grade officer to general. The troops have fought with a stoicism, given the uncertain and ugly aspects of the war, that entitles them to better leaders.



General Westmoreland was a picture-book soldier — and worse still, a man who repeatedly attempted to win in the press briefings what he could not win in the field. General Abrams has the virtue, at least, of holding his tongue; but despite the adulation a recent profile in the *New York Times Magazine* heaps upon him, he remains a cumbersome slugger outwitted by a nimble foe who employs the social and political terrain of Vietnam, as well as the physical terrain, to evade the crushing American embrace.

The war in Vietnam is a war about disruption — the enemy's ability to destroy the smooth functioning of authority. By every real test the enemy has succeeded in disrupting Vietnam, as much by forcing the Americans to disrupt life as through his own efforts. And the enemy, despite all the slightly shrill assertions from General Abrams' headquarters or from the American Embassy in Saigon, can go anywhere he chooses in Vietnam, if and whenever he is willing to pay the price.

That is why, incidentally, it is such a fraud to

talk of the "de-Americanization" of the war. The war was Americanized for a reason — because the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN) was disintegrating, fast, in late 1964. We were not told so then. Indeed, according to Henry Cabot Lodge, then our representative in Saigon, on January 17, 1965: "They . . . do a disservice who deny that much has been achieved; that the military program, the economic program, the social program, the informational program, and the technical programs have all accomplished much, have indeed built the springboards of victory."

This was the pap we were given then. But General Westmoreland in his retrospective report of this year has since confirmed that the South Vietnamese, even as Ambassador Lodge spoke, were losing a district capital and a battalion a week — and this *before* the North Vietnamese had intervened *en masse*.

To stay the sickening deterioration of the military and political situation, the United States then committed its troops, along with massive air and artillery support. It was then that the North Vietnamese moved in to save the insurgency in the south; but Saigon, let us remember, had been beaten by the Viet Cong alone.

Saigon alone cannot win its war, either against the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese sponsors, or against the Viet Cong alone were we, an unlikely event, able to negotiate a North Vietnamese commitment to "withdraw." To believe that South Vietnamese troops could take over from the American combat troops and fight at the American level of effectiveness (itself nothing remarkable) is to be guilty of the solemn credulity of children.

A complete withdrawal of American troops would leave the South Vietnamese devoid of the massive artillery and air support which time and again have saved our own men. If American combat troops alone were withdrawn and support operations left intact, the ugly truth is that those left behind would find themselves in deadly jeopardy, likely to be massacred by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese — for the simple and terrible reason that the South Vietnamese troops could not protect them and would be unlikely to try.

A serious de-Americanization of the war, in the absence of at least tacit agreement with the enemy, and this implies serious negotiations by *us*, would quickly lead to military disaster.

If half the American force departed — and if the Nixon Administration's actions indicate anything, it is a desire to cut combat deaths and thus to withdraw combat troops — what remained would be endan-

gered, not merely by the enemy, but just as likely by a quite possibly hostile South Vietnamese Army which felt it had been betrayed.

In this war in which the Generals have been given nearly five years, more than forty thousand American lives, and something like \$150 billion to win, what would the vendors of the military solution, and they are legion still in Saigon and Washington, have us do?

The home front, they argue, must stiffen of course — when, if they were wise, they might well thank the discontent on the home front for providing them with a future excuse for failure, a *Durchstolzlegende*, a “stab-in-the-back-legend” such as permitted the German Army after 1918 to try it all over again.

Well, to be sure, there are those bothersome enemy sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. The enemy hides there and stocks supplies there and so the sanctuaries indeed partially negate our air interdiction efforts. They offset in part the advantage conveyed by our immense logistical superiority. But even given this privilege of hiding in Laotian and Cambodian sanctuaries, surely the disparity in strength between them and us remains enormous. The sanctuaries alone are not sufficient to account for our indifferent success. And having failed with half a million men to pacify a limited area, namely South Vietnam, shall we now, with good effect, triple the size of the war arena? Hardly, it would seem, a recipe for instant success.

Shall we invade the north? I doubt that public opinion in the United States would bear such an adventure. And even if there were an initial thrill of relief as the troops landed at Haiphong and struck for the North Vietnamese capital, I doubt that the thrill would last long — not as the cost in American dead and wounded soared.

The North Vietnamese leadership is not stupid — as we have cause to know. The possibility of such an invasion cannot have escaped them. Again, as we have cause to know, the Vietnamese population both in the north and south are good, indeed indefatigable, with shovels and earthworks. Invading a well-prepared North Vietnam would hardly be a piece of cake — except to the irrepressible military mind which, asked a question, invariably replies with that snappy cry, “Can do!”

America is fighting on bad terrain — physical, social, political. Our Generals do not understand the social and political bog they have blundered into. And that is why, tactical and strategic ineptitude aside, diplomatic ineptitude aside, we are not winning — and, hateful as it is to say it, are indeed losing. For we are losing in a perfectly classical fashion. We have been stalemated on the killing ground and the patience, the cohesion, of the homefront is disinte-

grating. That is precisely the way the Japanese beat the Russians in 1905.

This war has many ironies. But not the least of these is the dogged insistence of the military — of a nation that dropped millions of tons of bombs on Germany and Japan during World War II in an effort to destroy the morale of the homefront — that Hanoi’s effort to impair American home morale is somehow *unfair*. And hence too the repeated fatuity of the American assertion that the enemy cannot get a military win. But, of course, any win is a win — and nothing better shows the bankruptcy of the American military mind than the fact that it cannot conceive as a military win anything short of annihilating your enemy or making him surrender to the threat of overwhelming force. How Clausewitz’ ghost must groan.

There are ironies, and little poignancies too. One of the most poignant features of the Vietnam war, (assuming that one cares at all about the bewildered plight of the American leadership responsible for the mess, as against the plight of the Vietnamese people and the plight of the American troops who are asked to die in an unworthy and futile effort) is the pathetic ongoing attempt to convert the war, somehow, somehow, into a knowable war.

The complaints are legion: if only the enemy would stand and fight our kind of battle; if only we could make it into a large-unit war; if only the Chinese would, in fact, intervene and thereby cure the legal and moral ambiguities of *our* intervention; if only there were really that much to hit from the air, both north of the 17th Parallel and in the south. For there really is not.

And that is where so many who oppose the war in this country are, on the factual level at least, wrong as well. Incredible as it may seem, Vietnam is not, certainly to anyone who saw the ruin of Europe and Japan after World War II, a badly devastated country. Indeed, that is one of the eeriest features of all. One flies in a helicopter from one end of the country to another and sees so little damage. And where is the enemy, one asks, in those smiling valleys, wide-stretching rice paddies, green jungle clumps — but where, but where?

Well, some people think they know. And so, one afternoon at four o’clock, two South Vietnamese Air Force jets peel off and splash napalm all over a hillside — how many tens of thousands of dollars spent to intercept a little band of black-pajamaed Viet Cong who just *might* be sneaking down into the valley to collect a little rice.

Jets? Napalm? To intercept five or six coolies mov-

ing, if they are there at all this four o'clock of a sunny afternoon in II Corps, under thick jungle cover?

But why not an ambush patrol to intercept the enemy? (Let us put aside for the moment any question of whether we ought to be doing anything of the kind, and merely concentrate on efficiency, on technique.) Well, it is well known that American troops do not like to climb hills; the jungle trail snakes two or three thousand feet above the plain. And the Army of South Vietnam? Well, it seems they prefer napalm to climbing hills too. Everyone is spoiled; we are fighting a rich man's war. But, of course, the South Vietnamese Army is not rich, and when we go. . . .

So much of it is an exercise in futility. The jets attack, the oily flame blankets the hillside, the parrots scream, the monkeys chatter, and five minutes later the little band of Viet Cong clamber from their hiding place and slip down into the valley below. They will get their rice.



It is a parable, the toils and tribulations of America, the blind giant. It is so hard to understand. Flying into Tanson Nhut or Bien Hoa or Nha Trang Air Bases the eyes bug to see the wealth and power assembled: the acres of helicopters, the Phantom jets, the Dragonships so sinister in their black night paint, each equipped with four mini-guns to spew out two or three thousand rounds per minute and quite literally "hose down" an area and leave nothing on the surface alive. No wonder a succession of efficiency-minded pundits like Mr. McNamara and Mr. McGeorge Bundy and Mr. Walt Rostow could not make themselves believe in the futility and waste of it all. To see the American Army and Air Force in Vietnam

is to see immediately where \$30 billion goes — and to stand reassured in the wavering faith that it is, after all, still the *mighty* United States.

Alas for the military dream, reality is far otherwise. Ten or twelve miles from Nha Trang Air Base you do not stroll in the countryside except on combat patrol. The young boys on the outpost camps mountaintop huddle behind the sandbags and concertina wire, besieged by the unknown, while in plain view, so achingly near and yet unutterably far away, the sail boats heel to the wind along Nha Trang beach. It is a surrealist war.

It is all a bad business, and the worst of it is that the United States — the people, the mass, the rank and file — have not really faced up to how bad. There are very few options left in Vietnam — but the Nixon Administration does not seem to know this. It cannot *win* its way out of Vietnam because, short of divine intervention, the United States cannot, on all the evidence, get a battlefield win there. It cannot withdraw the combat troops in sizeable numbers without inviting a military disaster. And it cannot hang on and make Hanoi see reason, because Hanoi lives in Vietnam, while we do not, and Hanoi's leaders have nowhere else to go.

The only thing left now is Paris. And the trouble is that we are not seriously negotiating there. The war has been waged to challenge the legitimacy of the Saigon government and to supplant it by the N.L.F. Since the United States, even if it has not won, is a mighty nuisance to Hanoi and the Viet Cong, each side will have to compromise. But to compromise is not to abide by "free elections," whatever that might be in the Vietnamese context. It is not to grant the Viet Cong an amnesty, again whatever that might be, the record of the Saigon Generals being what it is.

A compromise can only mean a government that is neither Thieu nor straight N.L.F. In short, a coalition. And if that should mean a Communist takeover at some future date — well, a negotiated *phased* withdrawal of foreign troops after settlement, not before, might slow the takeover process down. And if even that is impossible, since the American stamina after five years weakens, since we have waited too long to compromise, since the non-Thieu anti-Communist forces have long since been ground down, if after all this the better organized Viet Cong seize power, it will have to be.

You cannot get an honorable peace out of a dishonorable and futile action. The war, in any case, was never to be won by us alone. It was always a Vietnamese war, obscure, bitter, to us unknowable.

It is time to end it. We have done all that we can, in decency or indecency, be expected to do.