



Self- Destruction

The Disintegration and Decay
of the United States Army
during the Vietnam Era

Cincinnatus

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(THE DISINTEGRATION AND
DECAY OF THE UNITED STATES
ARMY DURING THE VIETNAM ERA)

by Cincinnatus



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To the
46,616 combat dead
and the
10,386 noncombat dead

57,002



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Introduction

Since 1973, the standard explanation given by the military for the defeat of the United States Army in Vietnam is that the politicians were to blame. Had they given United States forces a free hand to do what needed to be done, the war would have been won. Without that freedom and unable to do what was necessary, the theory goes, the army was compromised and the battle was lost.

The author of this book is persuaded of the following propositions: The Vietnamese conflict, like all wars, was indeed a political war. Politicians did place certain limitations upon the United States Army's freedom of action. All armies face such restrictions. Within the bounds of those political restraints, America's military had wide latitude of action and a clear opportunity to win in Vietnam. It met defeat because it failed to "know the enemy" and therefore could not adopt the strategy and tactics that were specific to the particular enemy it faced, and because it forgot vital lessons learned in its own history. Vietnam showed clearly that our strategic and tactical military thought can be shamefully shallow and palpably wrong. It further demonstrated that as the war dragged on, the army acted as though it was more interested in self-perpetuation and self-aggrandizement than in the efficient fulfillment of its mission.

The defeat in Vietnam is behind us, but its nature poses queries about the future. Having been wrong in Vietnam, is the army's approach to conflict still wrong? Has the army begun an internal reassessment in order to identify and cure its ills? It is a question on which the future of the nation may hang.

The army chose not to adapt to the unique environment of Vietnam. It conducted big-unit operations against bands of guerrillas. It sought to achieve victory through attrition. It was uninterested in providing greater security for the people of the countryside and cities. It repeatedly relied on tactics already proven inadequate. It seemed not

to understand the need for pacification and when it belatedly tried out that approach, it combined pacification with combat operations, thus negating both. It relied too heavily on technology and the lavish use of firepower. It refused to adopt more primitive tactics that could have dealt effectively with the sort of enemy it faced. It ignored calls for change that came from within. It continued to function as if it was pursuing enemy units of the Warsaw Pact nations across the plains of central Europe.

Stated simply, the army made too many mistakes in its years in Vietnam. If those same errors are not to be repeated in some future conflict, their sources must be identified, understood, and corrected. At some point, for reasons then believed good, America's army will once again be sent into battle. It will be unfortunate if it has closed its eyes to the lessons of Vietnam and again faces a *débaclé*.

America's military must remain healthy and innovative. It must encourage the original thinkers within its ranks if it is to meet diverse challenges from diverse foes. It must learn to encourage suggestions and criticisms from within its own ranks and listen to challenges to its doctrines of battle. For too long, innovative thought on strategy and tactics has come not from within the army but from civilian contract consultants. Unlike in the earlier days of Sherman and Lee, McArthur and Patton, Thayer and Mahan, Washington and Greene, officers today offer infrequent and usually low-level "suggestions."

The army's view of its military mission has been out of focus. It thoroughly misunderstood the appropriate ways to fight limited wars or wars of national liberation within the Third World. Past mistakes are unacknowledged. The old, old refrain that the army failed because of political softness and social unrest at home is still the theme song of the upper ranks. The fact is that the military disaster in Vietnam grew out of ineptitude at the top.

The pages that follow narrate the manifestations and explore the causes of that ineptitude. It is to be hoped that this document will engender comment and debate. There are many within the military hierarchy who still believe in old ways and who will dispute what follows. Such debate is essential if from the Vietnam crucible is to come improvement in the flexibility of thinking and tactical adaptability of this nation's military forces.

The material set forth here may seem obvious. In one sense, at least, it is, for all the information set down here long has been available to the army's leaders. Had they been persuaded of its validity, they would have instigated changes. They should be aware that the ideas here are not the author's alone but that they enjoy consensus among countless hundreds of his associates within the military who are Vietnam veterans. Attention paid to problems now might save a new generation of American soldiers from another disaster.

* * *

As its title indicates, this study deals with troubles encountered by the United States Army during the years of the Vietnam conflict. It is not a history either of Vietnam during those years or of America's involvement there. Numerous chronologies exist, many of which are cited herein.

Although the pages that follow center upon the years of United States activity in Vietnam and use illustrative material from that conflict, their focus is on the United States Army (and occasionally on its sister services) during that war. More specifically, it is a discussion of the difficulties that arose within that branch of the military as a result of its participation in combat in Southeast Asia. The focus is on the army rather than upon the totality of United States forces, not because other branches had no problems, but in order to make this study manageable in size and because the author knows the army more intimately. Furthermore, the war was mainly an army war. That branch provided the most men and the military commanders, and established the parameters of the war. Although their members might disagree, the navy, the air force, the marines, and the Coast Guard all fought as auxiliaries to the main effort on the ground.

The insights of those who actually served and fought in Vietnam are basic to a document such as this. Too little effort has been made to record those impressions and convictions while they remain fresh. Thus, in addition to studying available written sources (published and unpublished, private and public, civilian and military, classified and unclassified), it seemed valuable to interview as many persons as possible who had been there. The author gathered opinions and reactions from veterans who ranged from generals to privates, from military wives to National Guardsmen, from the cautious to the bold, from the optimistic to the cynical, from those still on active duty to those who have resigned or been retired.

The bulk of the conversations were taped and were held with men in grades from captain to colonel, most of whom are still in active service. By and large they showed a real willingness to help and expressed hope that reforms might come about as a result of this work. Some of those interviewed were contacted a second or third time for additional discussions. The analysis developed here has resulted from careful study of as much of the writing about Vietnam as the author could master and from extensive consideration of the remarks made to him by officers and enlisted men over a period of many months of travel and interviewing.

In many cases, those interviewed wished to remain anonymous. Many feared that their careers would be jeopardized if their comments were publicly attributed to them. Several refused to have their words

tape recorded, and one or two did not even want notes to be taken during the conversations. Since so many desired anonymity, this treatment was extended to all who are quoted herein.

Eventually it was decided to extend the cloak of anonymity beyond those who were interviewed and to cover the author's own identity. In certain churches, ministers wear dark clerical garb to obscure as much as possible of themselves in order to allow their listeners to concentrate exclusively upon what is being said rather than upon who is saying it. That is my hope here as well.

* * *

It is difficult, in a project that by necessity takes this form, to give thanks in any appropriate way to all those who have offered me so much counsel and support. Without their aid, this book could not have been written. As always, there have been some who have been of particular help, and to them I offer special thanks. Perhaps they will be able to recognize themselves within the list below.

LTC J.D.A.	They come from many branches: Artillery,
COL R.F.E.	Infantry, the Chaplaincy, Medical Corps,
LTC R.S.L.	Intelligence, Adjutant General's Corps, Armor,
MAJ J.L.Y.	Engineers, Signal, Quartermaster,
CPT H.R.C.	Transportation, and Military Police.
LTC ...V.	Most hold regular-army commissions, although
COL B.E.J.	one is a navy officer and two are officers in the
MAJ S.E.H.	United States Air Force, while four others serve
COL T.B.W.	in the Army National Guard.
GEN ...A.	With but one exception, they all served in
LTC T.A.S.	Vietnam. They were stationed in places from
MAJ ...E.	Nam Can to Con Thien, on assignments
LTC ...S.	ranging from a LRRP member to brigade
MAJ L.B.C.	commander to divisional staffs, from Saigon
SSGT J.S.	posts to senior province advisers in "eye" corps,
LTC ...D.	from Special Forces units to ARVN-counterpart
LTC W...F.	advisers.
LTC ...G.	They served. They offered their help on this
LTC A.B.J.	manuscript.
LTC ...M.	They have my thanks.
LTC B...M.	
LTC H.A.S.	
LTC L.G.W.	
MAJ L.J.S.	

COL E.R.S.
 COL A.W.G.
 COL R...M.
 LTC T.D.C.
 LTC B.K.W.

Prof. L.A.P.
 Prof. R.P.I.
 Prof. T.P.D.

My academic advisers: men knowledgeable in their fields who saved me from many pitfalls and who proferred much help.

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Mr. W.E.H.
 Mrs. J.J.A.
 Mrs. L.G.C.

My readers and critics of my writing style who enabled me to set this forth in English.

. . . . G.

My consort.

and, of course,

My editor, Eric P. Swenson

Observations and conclusions throughout are my own. Errors of any kind that persist into print do so in spite of those listed above.

CINCINNATUS

July 1979

Glossary

- AID (USAID)** United States Agency for International Development
- American decade** The years of greatest U.S. involvement in Vietnam, 1964–1973
- Aerial Observer (AO)** An observer, often for an artillery unit, who makes his terrain surveillance from a helicopter
- Army Regulation (AR)** Rules established by the army to govern actions and activities in the several areas of military endeavor
- Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)** The South Vietnamese army
- Body counts** The practice by the United States and its allies in Vietnam of tallying enemy dead and using such figures as “statistical indicators of military success”
- Combined Action Program (Platoon) (CAP)** A marines program for integrating U.S. and Vietnamese troops into coherent units for purposes of local security operations
- Cherim** A Hebrew word meaning “holy war of destruction”
- Chieu Hoi** A program in effect for a time during the Vietnamese conflict in which enemy soldiers were encouraged to defect to friendly forces; the term is a Vietnamese word meaning “open arms”
- Civilian Irregular Defense Group(s) (CIDG)** A Vietnamese defense force
- CINCPAC** Commander-in-Chief, Pacific
- COMUSMACV** Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
- CORDS** Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
- CP** Command Post
- Enclave strategy** A program espoused by Gen. James Gavin in which U.S. forces would clear and hold certain areas—or enclaves—along the Vietnamese coast
- FM** Field Manual
- FO** Forward observer for an artillery unit
- Fodding** A term current within the U.S. Air Force and Navy referring to damage of machinery: foreign-object damage
- Fragging** The term used to describe efforts at harassment and assassination of career enlisted men and officers by disgruntled draftees
- Free Fire Zone** An area of terrain in which artillery could target and fire without restriction

- Friendly fires** The volume of fire, usually artillery, fired by U.S. forces against the enemy
- Friendly wounds** An injury suffered by an American soldier from friendly fires
- FSB** Fire-support base
- Geneva Accords** Signed on 20 July 1954, following the Vietminh victory at Dienbienphu, in order to put an end to the French Indochinese war by ordering a cessation of hostilities in all Vietnam. These accords established a temporary demarcation line at the 17th Parallel, north of which Communist forces were to regroup, while forces allied with the French were to do so in the south. General elections, which were to have been scheduled within a short time, were never held.
- Gook** Derogatory term used by U.S. soldiers to refer to Vietnamese nationals
- Green Machine** A term used by draftees to refer to the institutional army
- H and I** Harassing-and-interdiction artillery fires
- Hoc tap** A Vietnamese word meaning "reeducation"
- IDAD** Internal defense and development—a term referring to efforts at pacification of the countryside population of Vietnam; synonymous with stability operations, revolutionary development, internal security, pacification, the other war, rural construction, neutralization operations, nation building
- Infantry-heavy forces** American division weighted to give it more infantry-men than it would normally have
- Internal Security** See IDAD
- JCS** Joint Chiefs of Staff
- LRRP** Long-range reconnaissance patrol(s)
- LZ** A landing zone for helicopter use
- MAAG** Military Assistance Advisory Group
- MACV** Military Assistance Command, Vietnam; the general headquarters and staff of the American expeditionary forces in Vietnam
- MASSTER** Mobile Army Sensor Systems Test and Evaluation Resources
- MTOE** Modified table of organization
- Nation building** See IDAD
- Navarre Plan** The program of GEN Paul Henri Navarre, which he devised to defeat the Vietminh insurrection in French Indochina
- Neutralization Operations** See IDAD
- NLF** National Liberation Front; the political organization for South Vietnamese guerrilla forces
- NVA** North Vietnamese army
- OPLAN CEDAR FALLS** Operation Cedar Falls—a division-sized search-and-destroy mission in Vietnam
- OPLAN JUNCTION CITY** Operation Junction City—a division-sized search-and-destroy mission in Vietnam
- OPLAN ROLLING THUNDER** The U.S. Air Force's operation calling for the massive and continuous bombing of North Vietnam
- "Other War"** See IDAD
- Pacification** See IDAD
- Phuong Hoang** A Vietnamese word meaning "phoenix"; the program of disruption and assassination of the VCI
- PRG** Provisional Revolutionary Government for the VC National Liberation Front, constituted on 6 June 1969
- PIO** Public Information Office of the United States Army; now usually referred to as Public Affairs Office
- Punji stakes** Sharpened bamboo stakes, usually smeared with feces, located