

THINKING TWICE: THE WEINBERGER DOCTRINE AND THE LESSONS OF VIETNAM

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Debate is still raging over the Vietnam experience: why did we get involved, why did we lose, and what does our military failure mean for the future of U.S. foreign policy? In this article, Eric R. Alterman argues that, though consensus on these questions remains elusive within the U.S. civilian community, the outlines of an emerging consensus are evident within the U.S. armed forces. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's now-famous speech on the six essential conditions necessary before war should be fought reflects this military consensus. Mr. Alterman analyzes each of Weinberger's points in the context of military conclusions from the Vietnam era. He concludes that the lessons from Vietnam drawn by the armed forces can be seen clearly in the military's restraining role in recent U.S. policy toward Central America and Lebanon.

I. INTRODUCTION

On November 28, 1984, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger delivered a major speech before the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. on "The Uses of Military Power." Although press coverage centered on how Weinberger and Secretary of State George Shultz differ on what constitutes a prudent and judicious use of force by the United States, the Weinberger address went far beyond this: it presented a comprehensive doctrine on the limits of American power in the post-Vietnam world. Weinberger's point of view differed from the systems analysis and game theory perspective which has dominated civilian doctrine in the Pentagon since 1960; he spoke, as he has in many intra-administration disagreements, as the mouthpiece of the military itself. His six major tests to be employed before embarking on a military response, and his notes of caution regarding creeping involvement in a major conflict illustrate the growing consensus that has characterized the military's own views since

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its cathartic defeat in Southeast Asia. An examination of the intellectual evolution of the military elite since Vietnam and their reading of the "lessons of Vietnam" clarifies the strategic, political, and intellectual underpinnings of Weinberger's doctrine for "The Uses of Military Power."

Defeat in Vietnam traumatized the U.S. Army, and the shadow and legacy of that debacle remain in the hearts of those Americans who suffered most for the nation's mistakes in Southeast Asia. (This is not to denigrate the suffering of the Southeast Asians themselves, which certainly exceeded the losses to our own nation.) Today's military leaders — veterans of Vietnam — are determined to prevent American politicians from committing American forces to any potential conflict if they will be prevented, as they were in Vietnam, from carrying out what they perceive to be their professional duty as soldiers. To that end, the Weinberger Doctrine lists six essential conditions which must be met before a president may decide to send American soldiers off to kill and be killed for American interests. The Vietnam conflict met none of these tests, and the results of this injudicious and imprudent use of force in Indo-China were disastrous for all concerned: the Army, the country, and the people whom we were claiming to protect. Weinberger's six tests reveal what the military learned in Vietnam; subtleties and ambiguities of that conflict provide an important context for the strict guidelines laid down by the Secretary of Defense.

II. WEINBERGER'S SIX TESTS

FIRST: The United States should not commit forces to combat overseas unless the particular engagement or occasion is deemed vital to our national interest, or that of our allies.

One of Vietnam's ironies is the way the term "vital interest" was twisted and turned to fit this tiny Southeast Asian country. Before U.S. advisers were dispatched, few Americans had ever heard of Vietnam. In early 1981, the Army War College declassified a 3,500-page study by the BDM Corporation in Arlington, Virginia, entitled *A Study of the Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*. The study examined the war's implications for future U.S. tactics, strategies, and policies. Referring to South Vietnam, the report said, "what in the past may have been termed 'vital interests' can cease being seen as such in a very short span of time."¹ The study argued that U.S. difficulties in Vietnam arose because "the investment of U.S. political, economic and military prestige, not to mention

1. The BDM Corporation, *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, 8 vols. (Carlisle Barracks PA: U.S. Army War College, 1981), vol. 3, part 2, p. 4-2.

U.S. casualties, came to override the intrinsic importance of Vietnam to the U.S." The experience points to "the danger of having one fundamental principle . . . anti-Communism . . . elevated to the status of doctrine for all the regions of the world."² The BDM study later warned:

As long as U.S. policy is defined in negative terms — for example, "anti-Communist" or "anti-Diem" — it will be limited in coherence, continuity, and relevance to U.S. interests by the need to respond to situations rather than to consciously shape them.³

Colonel H. Y. Schandler (U.S. Army, hereafter referred to as USA) also faulted U.S. involvement in Vietnam for being based on a "rather naive strategy [which] saw the conflict in South Vietnam simply as a Communist aggression on the Cold War model — a challenge to a free nation by expansionist international Communism." This view, according to Col. Schandler, "overlooked South Vietnam's questionable legitimacy and anti-colonial tradition, and the nationalist credentials of North Vietnam." Schandler also remarked that Americans treated the South Vietnamese government and army with "disdain, even contempt . . . as if they were irrelevant; thus there grew a naked contradiction between the political objectives of the war."⁴

Colonel Harry Summers (USA), a professor at the U.S. Army War College and author of *On Strategy*, blamed Washington officials for committing U.S. troops not as defenders of a vital interest, but as "instruments of diplomacy, of bargaining with the enemy." In so doing, they "failed to understand what most Americans already know in their bones: war, limited or not, imposes a unique national effort,"⁵ and importantly, an effort that can be justified in the American military mind only on the basis of a vital national interest. South Vietnam could not be made to fit that bill no matter how much we inflated its strategic importance. General Andrew Goodpaster (USA), who commanded Army troops in Vietnam, for example, said that "even if it be granted that the country's continued independence was sufficient to justify resort to arms, we still should not have done so unless we could influence the situation enough to justify our human and material costs."⁶

2. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, part 1, sec. 3, p. 57.

3. *Ibid.*, vol. 5, part 2, p. Ex-4.

4. Quoted in Peter Braestrup, ed., *Vietnam as History* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 24, 29.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

6. Andrew Goodpaster, "Development of a Coherent American Strategy," *Parameters* 11 (March 1981):5.

SECOND: If we decide it is necessary to put combat troops overseas, we should do so wholeheartedly and with the clear intention of winning.

Of all the military's grievances stemming from the Vietnam War, the most bitter is that the army was dispatched to fight a war it was not allowed to win. Putting aside for a moment the argument over whether the U.S. could ever have "won" the Vietnam war, few scholars will disagree that political considerations constrained military action. "Limited war" theorists, most of whom ignored the military elements of warfare to concentrate on the political and psychological elements, influenced many of the intellectuals in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.⁷ The military itself, however, had little experience and even less patience with these new-fangled intellectual methods of warfighting. As General Westmoreland put it, "Nobody ever won a war by sitting on his ass."⁸

President Johnson's decision to minimize the domestic repercussions of Vietnam to safeguard his "Great Society" agenda had important military consequences. His steadfast refusal to mobilize the reserves was his most significant effort in this respect. Colonel Schandler has stated that this refusal depleted American forces for overseas bases, but was even harsher when depicting the military limitations imposed on those who were called to fight. In his view, "the President's policy objectives translated into doing the minimum amount militarily to prevent a South Vietnamese defeat, while convincing Hanoi that it would not succeed in its aggression."⁹ The net effect was to leave to the enemy the decision of where, when, and how the war would be fought.

Schandler was equally critical of the Joint Chiefs of Staff because they could not convey their military difficulties to their civilian superiors. The chiefs advocated a strategy of "victory" which would require an open-ended military commitment to Vietnam. They complained that constraints on their operations in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam and on U.S. air power allowed the enemy sanctuaries and safe supply routes, and gave him the ability to withstand the bombing campaign because its pressure never reached unacceptable levels.¹⁰ But the chiefs never considered resigning to protest these limits. "It got to be funny in the Pentagon," Schandler recounted:

7. See, e.g., Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963); Robert Osgood, *Limited War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

8. Quoted in Steven Peter Rosen, "Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War," *International Security* 7 (Fall 1982):108.

9. Quoted in Braestrup, p. 24.

10. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 26.

because every six months the President would come back to the Joint Chiefs and say, "How can we make greater progress in Vietnam?" They would reply, "Mine Haiphong, bomb Hanoi, invade Laos, invade Cambodia, and mobilize the reserves." And the President would laugh and say, "We're not going to do that, but within these constraints . . ."

And the Chiefs would reply, "Give the Marines, Army, Navy, etc. . . a little bit more of everything, and everything will be all right."¹¹

Never did the Chiefs reply, "Mr. President, we just cannot accomplish what you're asking for with what you're giving us." According to Colonel Summers, the younger generation of military leaders in Vietnam blamed "the tradition-bound senior Generals" for this as well as the "rigidity of Westmoreland" himself.¹² Those younger leaders have become today's senior leaders, who are determined not to fight a war which they are denied the opportunity to win.

The BDM study drew similar conclusions, albeit in a more systematic fashion. The study observed that "privileged sanctuaries are more likely to exist in a limited war than a total war, and a democratic power's self-imposed constraints contribute to that existence."¹³ On a larger scale, the study criticized "the American way of war" for unrealistically separating politics from fighting, and nearly ignoring the psychological medium. In Vietnam and elsewhere, such a style of waging war is "an inappropriate response to a well-organized and led, and externally reinforced Communist-style insurgency, and ill-serves the needs of our ally."¹⁴ The study's major recommendation on this point was that:

The precise determination of what is maximally reasonable must be made at both the political and military levels, where explicit interpretation of national policy should occur before in-country planners are engaged. It is important that this determination be the result of prior, conscientious deliberation rather than of default or over-rationalization, as sometimes occurred during the Vietnam conflict.¹⁵

Implicit in Secretary Weinberger's second point is the insistence that a military action be "wholehearted." In his speech, for example, he added

11. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 46.

12. Harry Summers, *On Strategy* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 2.

13. BDM study, vol. 1, sec. 5, p. 49.

14. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, part 1, sec. 7, p. 64.

15. *Ibid.*, vol. 5, part 1, p. Ex-2.

that "the President will not allow our military forces to creep — or be drawn gradually — into a combat role in central America or any other place in the world."

The military greatly resented the gradualist approach used in Vietnam. At the outset of the air war over North Vietnam in 1965, the Joint Chiefs recommended ninety-four targets to be hit in sixteen days. The president instead opted for a slower approach (the Rolling Thunder operation) which destroyed \$320 million worth of enemy facilities at a cost, in aircraft alone, of \$911 million.¹⁶ Lieutenant Colonel William O. Staudenmaier (USA) blamed this strategy on Johnson's desire not to "make China and Russia edgy." The bombing campaign was to convince North Vietnam to stop infiltrating the South and to give the South Vietnamese "enough confidence and vitality to go it alone."¹⁷

Major General George Keegan (USAF) held that "an eleven-day campaign of B-52s, fighter bombers, and F-111s operating at night at 200 feet and jamming, could have brought the war to a close as early as 1965."¹⁸ Colonel Alan Gropman (USAF), currently Deputy Director of Doctrine and Strategy in the Pentagon, also stated that if all the measures eventually taken against North Vietnam had been taken in 1965, the results might have been more satisfactory.¹⁹ Retired Lt. General William R. Peers (USA) concurred; he thought a major 1965 offensive would have spared countless lives and prevented injuries, as well as the political traumas in the U.S.²⁰

Implicit in this view was the concept that North Vietnam had a "breaking point" at which it would capitulate to U.S. demands. Westmoreland told a Senate committee in 1969, "If we had continued to bomb, the war would be over at this time — or would be nearly over. The enemy would have fully realized that he had nothing to gain by continuing the struggle."²¹ However, the United States' "breaking point" came considerably earlier than did that of the North Vietnamese.

Even had the Americans found a formula for military victory, what would that have meant in political terms? Few of the military critics could envision an adequate political situation for South Vietnam once the enemy had been neutralized.

THIRD: If we do decide to commit forces to combat overseas, we should have clearly defined political and military objectives. And we should know precisely

16. Cecil B. Currey [Cincinnatus], *Self-Destruction* (New York: Norton and Co., 1981), p. 53.

17. William O. Staudenmaier, "Vietnam, Mao, and Clausewitz," *Parameters* 7 (1977):86.

18. Thompson, p. 143.

19. Quoted in Braestrup, p. 84.

20. Harrison A. Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 84.

21. Quoted in John Mueller, "The Search for the Breaking Point in Vietnam," *International Studies Quarterly* 24 (December 1980):503.

how our forces can accomplish those clearly defined objectives. And we should have and send the forces to do just that.

The Secretary's third test stems from a number of difficulties the military encountered; it must therefore be broken down into a number of different statements, and each of these must be dealt with separately. His references to the need for "clearly defined political objectives" is unarguable, but actually agreement on those objectives proved very difficult during the Vietnam conflict. Sixty-eight percent of the Vietnam generals surveyed by General Douglas Kinnard (USA) felt that U.S. objectives in Vietnam were either "not as clear as they might have been" or "rather fuzzy and needed rethinking."²²

Karl Von Clausewitz wrote in *On War* that "No one starts a war — or rather, no one in his sense ought to do so — without first being certain in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it."²³ Official justification for the war changed at least twenty-two times, which suggests that the U.S. government, from a Clausewitzian viewpoint, should never have entered the Vietnam War. Such inconsistency meant that U.S. troops could "win" every major battle while making no progress toward winning the war. Hence the famous encounter between an American colonel and a North Vietnamese colonel, recounted in Harry Summers's book: "'You know you never defeated us on the battlefield,' said the American colonel. 'That may be so,' replied his North Vietnamese counterpart, 'but it is also irrelevant.'"²⁴ Former Joint Chiefs Chairman Maxwell Taylor blamed the U.S. for "not knowing ourselves, the South Vietnamese, or the North Vietnamese. Until we know the enemy and know our allies and know ourselves," he recommended, "we'd better keep out of this dirty kind of business."²⁵ Harry Summers put it this way: "War may be too serious a matter to leave solely to military professionals, but it is also too serious a matter to leave only to civilian amateurs. Never again must the President commit American men to combat without first fully defining the nation's aims."²⁶

"Knowing precisely" how U.S. forces will be able to accomplish their objectives can be extremely problematic when the civilian officials have different priorities from those of the military, and when communication between the two is lacking. Most uniformed officers would rather have seen the president give General Westmoreland the authority to prosecute

22. Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers* (Hanover, NH: University of New England Press, 1977), p. 169.

23. Karl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 57a.

24. Summers, p. 27.

25. Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Books, 1983), p. 19.

26. Quoted in Braestrup, introduction.

the war according to military principles and local developments, and so free him from being forced to coordinate strategy with Washington, the embassy in Saigon, and regional military headquarters in Honolulu. Yet many under Westmoreland's command in Vietnam claim he squandered the resources and authority which Washington did delegate. Strategy in Vietnam was an extremely complex matter because it involved political aspects such as the fostering of "democracy" and "pacification" of enormous regions widely thought to be sympathetic to the Vietcong.

Yet Westmoreland chose a simpler strategy: attrition. The idea was to grind down the enemy until they surrendered, as they had in World Wars I and II, or declared a draw at pre-war boundaries, as North Korea had done. The strategy depended upon U.S. technological, financial, and productive superiority over its enemy.

Unfortunately the enemy was willing to sustain losses which would have been unthinkable for a Western democracy. The North Vietnamese benefited from Westmoreland's strategy of attrition, because the impatience of the democratic populace with the apparent lack of progress in the war undermined the U.S. effort. General Vo Nguyen Giap stated in 1967 that in a long drawn-out war, global commitments and an eroding domestic base would prevent any significant U.S. troop deployments after 1967.

The strategy reached its climax for both sides during the holiday of "Tet," 1968, when the Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops sustained ten times more losses than did U.S. forces, losing a battle but nevertheless causing American policymakers to rethink their commitment to defeating the North Vietnamese. Shortly after Tet, Johnson convened the "wise-men" meeting of distinguished former officials to discuss the war. According to the notes of McGeorge Bundy, Johnson was convinced the war could no longer be won. Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson spoke for George Ball, Arthur Dean, Cyrus Vance, Douglas Dillon, and Bundy when he told the president, "neither the effort of the Government of Vietnam nor the effort of the U.S. Government can succeed in the time we have left. . . . We should do something by no later than late summer to establish something different."²⁷

Opponents to attrition presented strategic alternatives. For instance, despite Westmoreland's contention that the only alternative to attrition was a war of annihilation, Maxwell Taylor and General John Galvin both preferred an "enclave" strategy. This called for the expansion of the amount of friendly territory in which the local population had a stake in

27. Quoted in William Appleman Williams, Thomas McCormick, Lloyd Gardner, and Walter LaFeber, eds., *America in Vietnam* (Garden City, N.J.: Anchor Books, 1984), p. 271.

defeating the Vietcong. Westmoreland rejected these ideas as "an inglorious, static use of U.S. forces in overpopulated areas, with little chance of direct or immediate impact on the outcome of events."²⁸

General Bruce Palmer (USA) offered another alternative in *The 25-Year War: America's Role in Vietnam*, in which his criticism of U.S. tactics and strategy spares neither his ex-boss Westmoreland and nor the rest of the U.S. military. Palmer outlined a strategy based upon the selection of "the most defensible positions along the demilitarized zone (DMZ), extending the defensive line into Laos, and increasing naval pressure in the area." The focus of U.S. effort "would be on the development of a South Vietnamese capability to defend the nation from North Vietnam." Nevertheless, Palmer concludes that tactical options would probably not have turned the tide of the war. It was lost "primarily at the strategic, diplomatic, and political levels."²⁹

Many military officers have questioned the use of attrition and the reasons why Westmoreland stuck to this strategy so faithfully. Some believe its highly quantifiable results attracted the general and his superiors. One Vietnamese officer was heard to say, "Ahh, *les statistiques*. Your secretary of defense loves *statistiques*. We Vietnamese can give him all he wants. If you want them to go up, they go up. If you want them to go down, they go down."³⁰

Whatever the reasons for the choice, attrition was an outright failure. Lt. Colonel David Richard Palmer of West Point has written: "One thing should be absolutely clear: attrition is not a strategy. It is the irrefutable proof of the absence of any strategy. A commander who resorts to attrition admits his failure to conceive of an alternative; he uses blood instead of brains."³¹ Major General DeWitt C. Smith, former commandant of the Army War College, called attrition "a disaster . . . naive and ignorant . . . immoral . . . stripped of imagination and strategic mobility." He likened it to "attacking a swarm of hornets' nests with an expensive sledgehammer."³² In response to the BDM study, the Army War College lamented that "current U.S. strategy, doctrine and tactics are still based primarily on attrition." Since 1982, however, the Army has begun moving toward a more mobile "AirLand Battle 2000" strategy as a replacement. AirLand emphasizes increased mobility and flexibility in addition to advanced surveillance and targeting systems and improved

28. Quoted in Currey, p. 82.

29. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1984), p. 183.

30. Quoted in Currey, p. 82.

31. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 73.

32. Quoted in BDM study, vol. 6, part 1, sec. 3, p. 42.

battlefield communications. The new focus is on field leadership, unit cohesion, and independent operations including defensive counterstrokes behind enemy lines. Former Joint Chiefs Chairman Edward C. Meyer is widely credited with advancing AirLand's cause within the Army.³³

Attrition and its corollary "search and destroy" missions had other military effects which proved extremely costly for the Army. The most notorious of these was the "body count." Given the elusive nature of the enemy, the lack of contested terrain, and the guerrilla tactics of Vietcong farmers, the U.S. did not have at its disposal orthodox ways to measure progress. The body count, upon which the Pentagon finally settled, proved not only useless but destructive. Sixty-one percent of the generals in Kinnard's survey admit that body counts were "often inflated."³⁴ Former War College Commandant Dewitt C. Smith wondered, "how did we ever come to use such an odious phrase?" The need for body counts, according to Chaplain Cecil B. Currey (USA), led to the digging up of corpses, the killing of prisoners, and the destruction of friendly villages.³⁵ To this day, no one has yet determined with any degree of accuracy how many people were needlessly killed while on body-counting missions.

FOURTH: The relationship between our objectives and the forces we have committed — their size, composition, and disposition — must be continually reassessed and adjusted if necessary.

During the height of the war, many politicians and officers argued that while it might have been a mistake for the United States to commit its forces and prestige to the government of South Vietnam in the first place, it would be even greater folly to withdraw them dishonorably because our allies needed to be shown the firmness and reliability of our commitments. Ironically, the Europeans wanted the U.S. to withdraw from Vietnam because of troop depletions in Europe. The military was of two minds on this question. General Westmoreland believed that during the three years of political turmoil following the overthrow of President Diem, "we could have withdrawn gracefully. After that, it was inconceivable to me that we could have done so until our strategy played its hand."³⁶ Many officials though, did recognize how ill-suited Vietnam was for prolonged warfare, and hoped to extricate American troops as early as possible.

33. See Deborah Shapley, "The Army's New Fighting Doctrine," *New York Times Magazine*, 28 November 1982, pp. 37-39.

34. Kinnard, p. 172.

35. Currey, p. 90.

36. Quoted in Thompson, p. 8.

A civilian reassessment of our commitment in Vietnam might have occurred had the quality of information the public received been better. The CBS-Westmoreland troop count dispute makes clear that the armed services, intelligence offices, private studies, and the press reported and assessed quantitative data quite differently.

According to Colonel John M. Collins of the Naval War College, the war was "initially an insurgency, aided by an infiltration." It did not become "an invasion aided by an insurgency" until the United States had already lost by pursuing its misguided strategy.³⁷ Collins would have preferred to see the United States eradicate the social causes of the Vietnamese rebellion instead of merely wrestling with its symptoms. The Pentagon was fighting a war on the basis of mistaken assumptions which few in the government or military questioned during the war. The story of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's aides, who, seeking to reassess the war's progress in 1969, fed all the Vietnam-related data into a computer and asked, "When will we win?" and received the answer: "You won in 1964"³⁸ illustrates the irrelevance of Pentagon measurements. The Vietnam experience shows the consequences of ignoring "continual reassessment and adjustment" of the nation's forces and objectives, a mistake against which the military has learned to be on its guard.

FIFTH: Before the U.S. commits combat forces abroad, there must be some reasonable assurance we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress. We cannot fight a battle with the Congress at home while asking our troops to win a war overseas or, as in the case of Vietnam, in effect asking our troops not to win but just to be there.

Of the Weinberger Doctrine's six tests, the fifth may be the hardest learned and now the most adhered to of Vietnam's painful lessons. The military had every right to be embittered by the treatment accorded them upon their defeat as the instruments, not the originators, of failed diplomatic policies.

From a military perspective, the breakdown of public support for the war effort took five major forms: congressional opposition, draft evasion, President Johnson's decision not to call up the reserves, unsympathetic reporting in major press organs and television networks, and impatience on the part of the public. The last problem has plagued the military in nearly every war because American citizens do not perceive a direct threat. De Tocqueville warned us almost 200 years ago that "in times of danger, a free people will display far more energy than any other"; yet to believe

37. John M. Collins, "Vietnam Postmortem: A Senseless Strategy," *Parameters* 8 (1978):8.

38. Summers, p. 18.

they will submit to "numerous and painful sacrifices" without clearly perceiving this danger "is to betray an ignorance of human nature."³⁹

Lyndon Johnson chose to fight the Vietnam War without asking Congress to declare war, thereby burdening the effort from the outset with questionable legality. Military opinion regards this as an ill-conceived decision. General Westmoreland has said that "President Johnson . . . should have forced Congress to face its Constitutional responsibility for waging war." Colonel Summers has added that whether or not Johnson could have obtained a declaration of war from Congress, by approaching them "he at least would not have felt compelled by fears of right-wing criticism to commit U.S. troops to South Vietnam's defense. In both cases, the country would have shared in the debate and the decision."⁴⁰

Colonel Alan Gropman blamed problems in Congress for the United States' inability to form a coherent strategy. "You can't have a valid strategy," Gropman explained, "when your view is no longer than the next Congressional election or the next roll-call vote on a highway beautification bill."⁴¹ While the military grew extremely impatient with Congress during the war, and Secretary Weinberger singled out that institution for criticism in his Press Club speech ("There has not been a corresponding acceptance of responsibility by Congress for the outcome of decisions concerning . . . the military"), some officers like Summers feel that increased Congressional involvement in military matters, through the War Powers Act, is beneficial.

Summers recently wrote in an unpublished letter to the *New York Times* that

to suppose that the American people whose sons' and daughters' lives are put in jeopardy on the battlefield do not have to be consulted in advance [through Congress] is to fly in the face not only of the Constitution, not only in the face of Secretary Weinberger's "doctrine," but in the face of common sense itself.⁴²

Although half of all military officers have a low opinion of Congress (according to a June 1984 *Newsweek* poll), Vietnam seems to have taught them that concerted congressional opposition is considerably worse than congressional muddling.

President Johnson's draft policy, which exempted most of white upper-middle-class America from the fighting, meant that a demographically

39. Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Knopf, 1945), p. 228.

40. Quoted in Braestrup, p. 111.

41. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 84.

42. Harry Summers, unpublished letter, 7 November 1984 (available from the author).

unrepresentative section of America bore the burden of Vietnam. This underprivileged minority concluded that society viewed their lives as expendable. One general wrote to correspondent Arthur Hadley,

And who are these young men we are asking to go into action against such solid odds? You've met them, you know. They are the best we have. But they are not MacNamara's sons or Bundy's. I doubt they're yours. And they know they're at the end of the pipeline and that no one cares. They know.⁴³

The unambiguous rejection of the war by the nation's youth on college campuses further divided the military from the society it was in theory protecting. Major General Keegan explained that he thought "it was good that the young people of this country raised their hands and said 'We've gone far enough.'" He concluded, "I hope that in years to come, the leadership of this country will think more carefully about committing itself to open-ended conflict in which the costs to society have not been thought through more carefully."⁴⁴

Johnson's refusal to call up the reserves was intended to shield his domestic agenda from the rigorous sacrifices of wartime. In the view of the BDM study, the lack of mobilization "conveyed a sense of irresolution" about the war. The study also speculates that "had the reserves been called up at the outset with public support," the war might have ended with "different results." Colonel Summers lamented that Johnson's decision deprived the Army of what Clausewitz termed "the passions of a people mobilized for war."⁴⁵ Aside from its military values, a reserve mobilization would certainly have helped awaken the American public much earlier to the ever-widening military commitment the nation was making in Vietnam. Instead, the war became simply a few minutes of a nightly newscast. The net effect of nonmobilization, in Summers' view, was that "we fought the war in cold blood."⁴⁶

Many officers in Vietnam believed that the American media also contributed more than their fair share to the debacle. Scholars have written volumes about the media coverage of Vietnam, the first "TV war," and its effects on public opinion. By and large, the military felt the media's war coverage undermined its cause — and hold particular reporters and news organizations guilty of crimes bordering on treason. According to General Kinnard's study, 89 percent of the generals surveyed responded negatively to the reporting about the war, while 91

43. Quoted in BDM study, vol. 7, part 1, sec. 1, p. 1.

44. Quoted in Thompson, p. 141.

45. BDM study, vol. 5, part 2, p. Ex-6.

46. Summers, pp. 28, 35.

percent disapproved on the TV coverage. Retired General Hamilton H. Howze (USA) spoke of "heavily slanted, anti-administration and anti-military reporting in the media," accusing the press of a "program of vilification." Retired Lt. General Lewis W. Walt (USMC) wrote, "the camera, typewriter and tape recorder are effective weapons in this war — weapons too often directed not against the enemy, but against the American people." Another general insisted that the media conducted a psychological warfare campaign that could not have been done better by the enemy.⁴⁷

Press coverage of the Tet offensive particularly embittered the Army leadership, because reporting of this tremendous military victory for the U.S. also sapped the American elite's will to continue the war. Since then, the military has tried to understand why it received such unfavorable coverage and to reach a better relationship with reporters. Lt. Colonel Staudenmaier attributed unsympathetic press coverage to the press's lack of understanding of the war, and said they catered to "a dissident intellectual element that was fully prepared to exploit any unfavorable news about the War." Staudenmaier concludes, however, that the government, not the press, "must take the blame for never really levelling with the American people." Major General Winant Sidle (USA) explained that "if our media had used similar rules for the assignment of reporters to Vietnam" as the Baseball Writers' Association uses to allow writers to become official scorers, the coverage would have been more objective. "And this might well have changed the entire outcome."⁴⁸

But as Colonel Staudenmaier recognized, the military's political problem was not press coverage, Congress, draft evaders, or the reserves — it was the American people. By the beginning of 1969, a large percentage of Americans had concluded that the war was a mistake and the United States should begin to withdraw. According to the BDM study, Presidents Johnson and Nixon deserved some of the blame for the war's unpopularity: "Presidential failure to consider and to mitigate the impact of foreign ventures upon the domestic environment may result in the loss of credibility and thereby the decline of public and congressional support, causing the foreign policy venture to fail."⁴⁹

General Fred Weyand (USA) spoke as eloquently as any officer has of the folly committed by politicians who try to wage war without the support of the American people. Then U.S. Army Chief of Staff Weyand explained:

47. Kinnard, p. 124 and p. 133.

48. Quoted in Salisbury, p. 112.

49. BDM study, vol. 4, part 2, p. Ex-9 and sec. 2, 35.

When the Army is committed, the American people are committed. When the American people lose their commitment, it is futile to try and keep the Army committed. In the final analysis, the American Army is not so much an arm of the Executive Branch as it is an arm of the American people. The Army cannot, therefore, be committed lightly.⁵⁰

SIXTH: The commitment of U.S. forces to combat should be a last resort.

This last of Weinberger's tests seems to be the most fundamental: that all potential alternatives should be explored before politicians resort to bloodshed to settle their differences. Yet unless the United States is physically attacked, the "last resort" test will remain highly subjective. In Vietnam, for instance, the war came gradually, and so this test, like the ones which preceded it, was never applied. The question remains whether this test is taken seriously by political and military leaders. This article cannot answer that question. Mr. Weinberger will simply have to be taken at his word.

CONCLUSION: AFTERMATH OF VIETNAM — THE REAGAN YEARS

Following Vietnam, the United States retreated briefly from its policy of Third World military interventionism, while the nation and the military tried to heal the many wounds left by America's first defeat. Following the Iranian hostage crisis and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, however, the election of Ronald Reagan signalled a return to pre-Vietnam posturing and military activism. During Reagan's first term, the U.S. military became involved, albeit on a far smaller scale than in Vietnam, in three areas: Lebanon, Central America, and Grenada.

The American experiences in Lebanon and Central America suggest that the military has memorized the lessons of Vietnam and the civilian leadership has chosen to ignore them. Secretary Weinberger, speaking for the military, reportedly opposed the large-scale deployment of American marines in Beirut and recommended their removal just before the explosion which killed 241 of them. The president's advisers, the Secretary of State, and the National Security Adviser overruled him. Newspaper reports evoked an eerie sense of *deja vu* when they quoted military leaders complaining that "political leaders did not carefully define the mission" and "political considerations restricted operations on the ground."⁵¹ The Pentagon committee conducting the official investigation

50. Quoted in Summers, p. 11.

51. Quoted in Richard Halloran, "U.S. Evaluates Battle Lessons in Middle East," *New York Times*, 25 February 1984, p. 1.

of the attack on the American Marine compound recommended that "the Secretary of Defense continue to urge the National Security Council to undertake a re-examination of alternative means of achieving U.S. objectives in Lebanon, to include a comprehensive assessment of the military security options . . . and a more vigorous and demanding approach to pursuing diplomatic alternatives."⁵² The U.S. made many of the same mistakes in Lebanon as it did in the earliest days of Vietnam. Nevertheless, in one aspect Lebanon was significantly different: the secretary of defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed the mission. Because of this opposition, U.S. troops were brought home before American prestige was unalterably linked with the commitment of military presence.

U.S. military involvement in Central America is particularly tempting to those who thought we should have remained in Vietnam, but fortunately, few are in the upper ranks of the U.S. military. As in Vietnam, U.S. "special forces" are advising local forces on tactics of guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency. Furthermore, CIA involvement is also heavy and secretive. But unlike the 1963 situation in Indochina, U.S. military leaders are paying careful attention to the social and political factors causing the conflicts as well as to U.S. popular opinion regarding diplomatic initiatives. According to a November 1984 Gallup poll, less than one-third of the American public supported the Reagan administration's efforts to overthrow the government in Nicaragua.⁵³ Hence military officials oppose increased U.S. military involvement in the country. General John J. Vessey, former head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (and a driving force behind Mr. Weinberger's speech), told the *New York Times* that neither he nor the Pentagon "advocated introducing U.S. combat forces to try to implement an American military solution to the problems of Central America." According to *New York Times* reporter Drew Middleton, General Vessey, his predecessor General Edward C. Meyer, former head of U.S. Southern Command in Panama General Wallace Nutting, head of U.S. European forces General Bernard Rogers, and many other generals who refused to be identified, "with unusual unanimity, say they oppose any American military intervention in Central America without the clear, unequivocal support of Congress and the people." According to them, "the military problem in El Salvador is the least important given underlying economic and social constraints."⁵⁴ It is questionable whether this cautiousness which Vietnam has induced will influence

52. Quoted in *Washington Post*, 29 December 1983, p. 1.

53. Gallup survey published in *The National Journal*, 1 December 1984, p. 2322.

54. Quoted in Drew Middleton, "U.S. Generals are Leery of Latin Intervention," *New York Times*, 21 June 1983, p. A9.

American civilian leadership enough to apply Secretary Weinberger's doctrine in Central America.

The American "rescue mission" on the island of Grenada in October 1983 passed all of Mr. Weinberger's tests — except the sixth and most subjective. The invasion was domestically popular, the mission was clear and feasible, and the political interference minimal. Secretary Weinberger even said he "wouldn't dream of over-riding" his generals who asked for a controversial ban on all press coverage during the first few days of the operation. The Chiefs of Staff supported the invasion, saying "It's what we were trained to do."⁵⁵ Secretary Weinberger, during his Press Club speech, pointed to Grenada as a proper, prudent use of military force. Most Americans did not object to the muzzling of the press, and the Pentagon later set up the Sidle Commission to solve some of the difficulties between the military and the media caused by both Grenada and Vietnam. By all objective measurements of the Weinberger doctrine, Grenada was and will remain the model.

As 1986 begins, the military finds itself in the unusual position of being the least aggressive voice in government. The Army has travelled an extraordinary distance in rectifying many of the difficulties it encountered in Vietnam. The more innovative AirLand doctrine has replaced attrition. Economic and social factors are now considerations in forming military strategy. Courses at the War Colleges and articles in the military journals emphasize ethics and personal responsibility. Many unsolved problems remain, but "the lessons of Vietnam" have reached the highest levels of the military and are now reflected in current policy. Political columnists like William Safire and Joseph Kraft may criticize the Weinberger doctrine, claiming that the military has "learned and overlearned the lesson of Vietnam," but according to Harry Summers it is not the military with whom these critics are arguing; "it's the Constitution."⁵⁶ The Founding Fathers wrote the "declaration of war" clause of the Constitution and appointed the president commander-in-chief in order to control the military; but as Vietnam taught, it is the civilian leaders and strategists, not the military, who need to be restrained if peace is to be preserved during the Reagan administration.

55. Quoted in Richard Halloran, "Joint Chiefs Supported U.S. Action as Feasible," *New York Times*, 27 October 1983, p. A23.

56. Telephone conversation with author, 7 December 1984.

