JOHN M. GATES, THE U.S. ARMY AND IRREGULAR WARFARE, CHAPTER EIGHT

PEOPLES WAR IN VIETNAM

Perhaps because I thought Timothy J. Lomperis had made some of the same errors I had found in the work of Colonel Harry Summers, I reacted rather strongly to Lomperis' 1988 article in *Parameters*. Unfortunately, the editor of that journal did not look as favorably upon my submission as his predecessor had upon my response to Summers. Seeing what I believed to be an erroneous analysis of the Vietnam War becoming so widely accepted was too disturbing for me to give up in my attempt to present what I believed to be a more accurate alternative interpretation. Although he rejected my manuscript, the editor at *Parameters* made a number of helpful suggestions, and a revised version of my paper appeared in *The Journal of Military History* in 1990.

The argument below elaborates upon a number of points treated in a cursory manner in the previous chapter. I believe that the two chapters taken together undermine the widely held view, evident in the quotations below, that the conflict in Vietnam was a war of aggression rather than a revolutionary civil war.

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. . . the war in Vietnam was not a true insurgency but a thinly disguised aggression --Norman B. Hannah, 1975.

*However the conflict began decades earlier, it has not ended as a bonafide civil war* --Colonel Robert D. Heinl, 1975.

*It was not . . . a victory for people's revolutionary war but a straight forward conventional invasion and conquest* --Sir Robert Thompson, 1975.

*There is great irony in the fact that the North Vietnamese finally won by purely conventional means, using precisely the kind of warfare at which the American army was best equipped to fight* --W. Scott Thompson & Colonel Donaldson D. Frizzell, 1977.

*There are still those who would attempt to fit it into the revolutionary war mold and who blame our defeat on our failure to implement counterinsurgency doctrine. This point of view requires an acceptance of the North Vietnamese contention that the war was a civil war, and that the North Vietnamese regular forces were an extension of the guerrilla effort, a point of view not borne out by the facts* --Colonel
In Vietnam, the guerrillas largely disappeared after they rose to mount a conventional attack, and the war then had to be won by the communists in conventional, almost American, terms --Timothy J. Lomperis, 1988.

The argument that in Vietnam the communists, often seen as "North" Vietnamese, triumphed in 1975 using "a conventional-war strategy" rather than engaging in a successful people's or revolutionary war is obviously not a new one, and it may even represent the predominant view of the war among senior American military officers and government officials. At first glance the argument appears to be quite reasonable, buttressed by the credentials of the people making it, and it has great appeal to readers who may want to avoid interpretations implying that the United States lost the war in Vietnam because of its inability to combat a communist insurgency.[2]

In 1975 American TV viewers saw the tanks of communist regular forces moving through the streets of Saigon and into the grounds of the Presidential Palace, a scene that has been rerun numerous times since its original filming. The powerful image of that particular footage, more reminiscent of World War II than the combat in Vietnam during the 1960s, lends support to the argument that people's war failed and that the war ended in a purely conventional attack. Also supporting such a view is the evidence, not widely recognized in the United States at the time, that local communist forces in South Vietnam were devastated during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Data gathered in the last years of the war indicated that many Vietnamese, particularly in the South, were tired of war, and even the communists noticed that enthusiasm for their cause was waning. It is thus no surprise that with the passage of time the proposition that people's war failed in Vietnam and was replaced by a more successful conventional-war strategy has gained widespread acceptance.

One should be wary, however, of any argument that fits so well with the long-standing conventional war bias of the American military or the individual desires of people who served in Vietnam or supported the American involvement to believe that the United States was not defeated there. As persuasive and comforting as arguments about the failure of people's war, the conquest of South Vietnam by the North Vietnamese, or the communist adoption of a conventional-war strategy may seem, they should be viewed with great skepticism, for they are often rooted in serious conceptual errors.

The war in Vietnam was not a war of aggression by the North against the South, nor was it ever a purely conventional war. From start to finish, the Vietnam War was a people's war, and the communists won because they had, as one American general who served in Vietnam observed, "a coherent, long-term, and brilliant grand strategy--the strategy of revolutionary war."[3]

In arguing the case that the war in Vietnam was primarily a conventional conflict, a number of authors have equated people's war with guerrilla warfare. They maintain
that the inability of the communists to overthrow the Saigon government using guerrillas alone and the use of large numbers of regular troops in the final offensive of 1975 proves either the speciousness of the communist claim to have been fighting a people's war or the complete failure of people's war with the 1968 Tet Offensive. To understand people's war, however, one must view the phenomenon through the eyes of its practitioners, and the writings of well known Vietnamese revolutionaries indicate clearly that the use of guerrillas was never the principal feature of the communist approach.

In Vietnamese communist writing, people's war is defined in terms of its participants and its goals, as well as its strategies and tactics. General Vo Nguyen Giap described it as "essentially a peasant's war under the leadership of the working class," a view present also in the writing of Truong Chinh, another important leader of the Vietnamese communist movement.[4] Leadership resided in the communist party organization, as the representative of the working class, but the goal of mobilization was to create "a firm and wide national united front based on the worker-peasant alliance."[5]

For the Vietnamese communists, the political dimensions of people's war were particularly significant. Giap claimed that in fighting against the French, "the agrarian policy of the Party played a determining role," and he referred to the importance of building "political forces" again in a 1967 discussion of the war in the South.[6] Truong Chinh maintained that "military action can only succeed when politics are correct," adding that "conversely, politics cannot be fulfilled without the success of military action."[7] In their theoretical and historical writings, the Vietnamese communists placed such importance on the coordination of the military and political dimensions of people's war that Giap called it "a law of the revolutionary struggle in our country."[8]

As described by the communists, the process of people's war was always far more comprehensive than interpretations emphasizing guerrilla warfare acknowledge. Truong Chinh wrote of resistance that "must be carried out in every field: military, economic, political and cultural," and Giap observed that "the fight against the enemy on all fronts--military, political, cultural, diplomatic, and so forth--is waged at the same time."[9] In his description of the people's war against the French, Giap noted that "parallel with the fight against the enemy, . . . our Party implemented positive lines of action in every aspect, did its utmost to mobilise, educate and organize the masses, to increase production, practice economy, and build local armed and semi-armed forces."[10] To focus solely on the military elements of people's war is to miss the essential comprehensiveness of the approach.

Even when writing about the strictly military aspects of people's war the communists presented a picture of the phenomenon that is totally at odds with a fixation on guerrilla warfare. If any single strategic element predominated in the Vietnamese conception of people's war, it was protraction rather than the use of guerrillas. Ho Chi
Minh observed in 1950 that "in military affairs time is of prime importance," and he ranked it "first among the three factors for victory, before the terrain conditions and the people's support."[11] Writing of "the imperatives of the people's war in Viet Nam" in 1961, General Giap placed "the strategy of a long-term war" first on his list, and earlier, during the war against the French, Truong Chinh observed that "the guiding principle of the strategy of our whole resistance must be to prolong the war."[12] As the latter told his compatriots, "only by wearing the enemy down, can we fulfill the strategic tasks of launching the general counter-offensive, annihilating the enemy and winning final victory."[13] Giap presented a similar view two decades later when he noted that "protracted resistance is an essential strategy of a people . . . determined to defeat an enemy and aggressor having large and well-armed forces."[14]

Militarily, guerrilla warfare was only one element in a comprehensive approach, and the Vietnamese practitioners of people's war never viewed it as decisive. Giap noted that the war against the French had "several phases." Guerrilla warfare was important, "especially at the outset," but with time "guerrilla warfare changed into mobile warfare." The communist military effort "passed from the stage of combats involving a section or company, to fairly large-scale campaigns bringing into action several divisions."[15] Giap saw the move from guerrilla war to mobile warfare as necessary "to annihilate big enemy manpower and liberate land," and he claimed that "to keep itself in life and develop, guerrilla warfare has necessarily to develop into mobile warfare." For him that progression was nothing less than "a general law."[16] Truong Chinh portrayed people's war in a similar way, calling it a "war of interlocking," in which "regular army, militia, and guerrilla forces combine and fight together." He too noted the need for guerrilla warfare to be "transformed into mobile warfare."[17]

In commenting on the war against the Republic of Vietnam and its American ally, Giap wrote of the coordination of "guerrilla, regional, and main-force units."[18] Similarly, in describing "the combined strength of people's war" in the final offensive of 1975, Generals Giap and Van Tien Dung noted a variety of techniques: "military attacks by mobile strategic army columns as main striking forces, combining military struggle with political struggle and agitation among enemy troops, wiping out and disbanding large enemy units, completely liberating large strategic regions in the mountains, rural and urban areas, and winning total victory by means of a general offensive and uprising right in the 'capital city' of the puppet administration."[19]

For the Vietnamese practitioners of people's war, guerrilla warfare was only one aspect of their military approach, with the military area itself being only one dimension of a much more comprehensive system of revolutionary warfare. In theory, the war moved through stages, from subversive activities that avoided direct confrontation with government military forces, to guerrilla war, and finally to mobile warfare in which regular forces predominated. In reality, however, Vietnam's
communist revolutionaries were more pragmatic. They moved their strategic emphasis back and forth from stage to stage as events and circumstances warranted. At times all three stages of activity existed simultaneously. In both theory and practice, people's war in Vietnam always encompassed much more than guerrilla warfare.

The role of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV or North Vietnam) in the people's war after 1954 is also frequently misunderstood by Americans. In part the problem is a function of the tendency of many Americans to see North Vietnam as a separate country bent on the conquest of its southern neighbor. Those same Americans have also tended to describe the 1975 offensive as an attack by "North" Vietnamese, implying that the leadership of the Vietnamese communist movement had regional rather than national roots.

In the eyes of Vietnam's communist leaders, however, the DRV was never a complete state, and their conception of Vietnam always included the territory governed by Saigon as well as that administered by Hanoi. General Giap characterized the North as "the liberated half of our country," seeing the DRV as "a firm base of action for the reunification of the country."[20] In 1956 Ho Chi Minh told the southern cadres regrouped above the demilitarized zone that the North was "the foundation, the root of the struggle for complete national liberation and reunification of the country." It was to become, he told them, "a strong base for our entire people's struggle."[21] Later, General Giap would refer to the North as "the vast rear of our army" and "the revolutionary base for the whole country."[22]

During the war against the French, Truong Chinh had noted Lenin's remark that "to wage a real war, we must have a strong and well organized rear," deeming it "very precious counsel for us in this long-term resistance war."[23] In the people's war for unification that followed the French withdrawal, the communists would not forget that "precious counsel." At the 1963 meeting of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Worker's Party in Hanoi, the Third Party Congress recognized the special role of the DRV, saying the time had arrived "for the North to increase aid to the South" and "bring into play its role as the revolutionary base for the nation."[24] Communist leaders did their best to maintain the fiction that the war in the South was being waged only "by the people and liberation forces of South Viet-Nam under the leadership of the National Front for Liberation," as Ho Chi Minh told a Western correspondent in 1965. Pham Van Dong had been equally disingenuous when he told Bernard Fall in 1962 that "the heroic South Vietnamese people will have to continue the struggle by their own means."[25] In the United States many opponents of the American war in Vietnam, including more than a few scholars, appear to have been deceived into accepting what George Kahin and John Lewis claimed was "the inescapable conclusion that the Liberation Front is not 'Hanoi's creation.'" They argued instead that the Front "has manifested independence and it is Southern."[26]

The fiction could not be maintained, however, and by 1967 General Giap would
openly portray the war as a "revolutionary struggle" waged by "people throughout the country," both North and South. As he wrote at the time, "to protect the north, liberate the south, and proceed toward reunifying the country, the northern armed forces and people have stepped up and are stepping up the violent people's fight."[27] The United States government was correct in its claim that the communist guerrillas and cadres in the South, as well as the National Liberation Front, were operational elements of the DRV. Clearly people in the American anti-war movement often had difficulty distinguishing between reality and communist propaganda, but they did not have a monopoly on self-deception. Americans supporting the war also failed to distinguish between reality and their own propaganda, refusing to see that a sovereign and independent Republic of Vietnam (RVN) could only exist if the Saigon government and its American ally won the war. The RVN was not a state to be defended but a state to be created. For Vietnam's communist leaders, a divided Vietnam was a Vietnam in agony, and as noted in the previous chapter, they were firmly committed to the goal of unification.

Authors who write of "the partitioning of Vietnam at the 17th parallel as a result of the Geneva Accords of 1954" and "North Vietnamese bent on reunifying the country," as one scholar has recently, need to give more careful attention to the available evidence.[28] The Geneva Accords created a situation in which two governments existed within Vietnam, but the Geneva documents did not "partition" the country. In 1954, neither communist nor anticommmunist Vietnamese accepted the idea that their nation had been partitioned. As a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate noted in November 1954, "Partition at the 17th parallel is abhorred by all Vietnamese, who regard unity of the three regions of Vietnam as a prerequisite of nationhood."[29] Leaders of the rival governments in Hanoi and Saigon both viewed the 17th parallel dividing line as it was defined in the Geneva declaration: a "military demarcation line" that was "provisional and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary."[30]

Communist leaders repeatedly claimed that only one, not two Vietnams existed, and initially non-communist leaders in the South took the same position. Communist strength in the North precluded unification of Vietnam on terms acceptable to the United States and its Vietnamese allies in the South. In explaining the war, American leaders created a grossly oversimplified and inaccurate picture of the war as the result of aggression by the sovereign state of "North" Vietnam against an independent and sovereign South. American leaders denied the civil nature of the conflict and worked for a solution to the Vietnam conflict similar to that achieved earlier in Korea. That outcome could only be achieved, however, if the United States succeeded in forcing the communists to abandon their goal of creating a revolutionary state in all Vietnam, a difficult task to say the least.

Significantly, the war in Vietnam was never a war of northerners against southerners. Before World War II, members of the Vietnamese communist party could be found throughout all of Vietnam. According to William Duiker, the Vietnamese
Revolutionary Youth League, formed in 1925, "had sunk its roots in all three regions of Vietnam," and Ho Chi Minh's August 1945 revolution was a nation-wide movement. Not only was communist leadership in Vietnam national rather than regional from an early date, but it remained very stable throughout more than two decades of conflict. Except for a few readjustments after the death of Ho in 1969, it changed little from the 1950s to the mid-1970s. Although the war in the South was directed by communists in Hanoi, that did not mean that the war was directed by "North Vietnamese." In fact, the group "bent on reunifying the country" was never composed solely of "North Vietnamese" or even led by them.

Although biographical information on Vietnam's communist leaders is incomplete, the data that do exist support the conclusion that the people who controlled the DRV and the war to overthrow the government in South Vietnam came from all regions of the country. Both before and after Ho's death four of the eleven members of the politburo came from south of the 17th parallel (36.4%), as did six of fourteen members of the politburo at the time of the communist triumph in 1975 (42.9%). In 1973, a majority of the nine member Secretariat of the Vietnamese Workers Party (VWP) came from the South, as did half of the members whose place of birth can be determined (20 of 38) elected to the Council of Ministers following the communist triumph.

As a 1973 analysis of VWP leadership by the U.S. mission in Vietnam observed, one fact "that leaps out of the data about VWP Central Committee members is the large number of them, including Ho Chi Minh himself, who were born or were first active politically in Central Viet-Nam." The study noted that "a disproportionate number of the leaders of Vietnamese communism," including "leaders of the Party and government in the DRV, and of the People's Liberation Armed Forces and the People's Revolutionary Party in South Viet-Nam," were drawn from the "central provinces in both North and South Viet-Nam." Individuals from central Vietnam constituted a majority in the Politburo and the VWP Secretariat during the war and in the Council of Ministers elected after it. Although the seat of the communist government that conquered the South resided in North Vietnam, its leadership was national, not regional.

The names of some of the individuals from south of the 17th parallel who held high positions in the communist leadership during the war are well known. One was Pham Van Dong, "probably Ho's closest associate since 1955," according to Bernard Fall. Another was Le Duan, who became the Party's leader following Ho's death in 1969, while the southerner Ton Duc Tang assumed Ho's title as president. Other southerners among the communist leadership, less well known to most Americans, included two central committee members (Hoang Anh and Tran Quoc Hoan) and six leaders of the National Liberation Front and/or the People's Revolutionary Government in the South who also joined the government of the unified communist Vietnam after the war (Nguyen Thi Binh, Nguyen Van Hieu, Vo Van Kiet, Tran Luong, Huynh Tan Phat, and Tran Dai Nghia).
Other communist southerners also gained widespread recognition. Colonel Bui Tin, a journalist who found himself the ranking regular officer at the Presidential Palace in Saigon, became prominent when he accepted the surrender there in April 1975, and General Tran Van Tra's history of the final offensive has become an important source for American scholars researching the war. Countless southerners also served in the ranks, not only as political cadres and guerrillas, but also as regulars. No knowledgeable author disputes the fact that southerners provided the vast majority of the combatants in the Viet Cong units that carried the major burden of the war before 1969, just as widespread agreement exists that the communist leadership in Hanoi initiated and directed the war in the South from its inception.

The regular forces that moved down the Ho Chi Minh trail to participate in the large unit war against the Americans contained soldiers returning to the South as well as combatants from the North. Xuan Vu, for example, described the high morale of southerners in late 1965, "dying to go back . . . motivated by the idea of the great General Uprising."[38] Even the White Paper issued by the Department of State in 1965 provided evidence that the communists infiltrating the South were not northerners, although that was not the document's intention. Although the White Paper claimed that "as many as 75 percent" of the Viet Cong entering the South from January through August 1964 "were natives of North Viet-Nam," the eighteen cases given as specific examples consisted overwhelmingly of individuals born south of the 17th parallel. Southerners made up eight of the document's nine "individual case histories" and seven of an additional nine "brief case histories of typical Viet Cong" presented in an appendix.[39]

The conclusion from the available evidence seems clear: the communist movement in Vietnam was not directed by northerners, although the communist seat of power and government was in Hanoi, and the war that ended in 1975 was not a conquest of the South Vietnamese by the North Vietnamese. The war ended in a communist victory, but the leaders of Vietnam's communist movement came from both sides of the 17th parallel, with the central region of the nation predominating. As historian Warren I. Cohen has observed, "if analysts persist in the notion that two separate nations existed in Vietnam in 1954, they will never understand the United States defeat there." The war between communist and anti-communist Vietnamese "was not a war of aggression by one nation against another. Separateness was something to be won on the battlefield by the secessionists, not proclaimed by others or imposed from outside."[40]

Although the communist goal of unification under a revolutionary government was remarkably consistent, flexibility, rather than rigid commitment to guerrilla warfare or any other particular approach, was the hallmark of the people's war in Vietnam. Thomas K. Latimer highlighted that flexibility in his survey of the ongoing debate within the leadership of the Vietnamese Workers Party over the proper strategy in the struggle for unification. From 1954 to 1958, the communists undertook political
organization and mobilization in the South while building socialism in the base area of the North and awaiting the collapse of the Ngo Dinh Diem government in Saigon. When that collapse did not take place, the communists adopted a more forceful approach, beginning with guerrilla warfare in 1959 and attempting to shift to mobile warfare in 1964. That move was thwarted by the United States, as was an attempt to gain a decisive victory early in 1968. The 1968 failure led to the recognition by leaders of the Party that negotiation and not general uprising might be the key to "push the Americans out of South Vietnam by coordinating the political struggle with diplomacy."[41] Latimer viewed the strategic shift following the 1968 Tet offensive, outlined in a May 1968 report authored by Truong Chinh, as "a half-step retreat."[42] At the time, the communist leadership reaffirmed the value of the protracted war model and focused their attention on the United States as the primary enemy to be negotiated or manipulated out of Vietnam. Political events within the United States made the achievement of that goal possible, but not before another communist move to mobile warfare was thwarted in 1972.

Given the flexibility inherent in the communist approach, none of the defeats proved decisive. Instead, the communists regrouped to make a successful bid for victory in 1975. As Latimer observed, "it was this ability to remain flexible, to fall back to a protracted war strategy, to beef up the political struggle aspect, as well as plunge ahead from time to time in an all-out military effort, which enabled the Vietnamese communists to sustain their 'revolution' in the south."[43] Another American scholar, Patrick J. McGarvey, had reached a similar conclusion even earlier. He concluded after the Tet offensive of 1968 that "Communist strategy will remain a dynamic one," in which "decisions will continue to be based on the realities of the battlefield." At about the same time Douglas Pike observed that "none of these three means--diplomacy, proxy struggle, or direct military--is mutually exclusive."[44] Pike noted that the communist leadership in Vietnam "has no hesitation about abandoning one method or policy when another appears more promising."[45]

Just as people's war appeared to be nothing more than guerrilla warfare to some Americans, and the communist leadership appeared to be "North" Vietnamese, the communists seemed to have triumphed in 1975 by using a highly conventional approach. One author has even described the winning communist strategy as "an American one."[46] The Vietnamese communists' own descriptions of the final offensive, however, support a very different conclusion.

The local communist apparatus in the South was hurt badly during the 1968 offensive, with high casualties and resulting demoralization, and the damage had not been completely repaired by the time of the 1973 cease fire agreement. In his study of the war in Long An province, Jeffrey Race noted that "the revolution movement in late 1970 was in a difficult position,"[47] a view confirmed by captured communist documents.[48] In his memoir, General Tran Van Tra, commanding communist forces in the region surrounding Saigon, observed that as late as 1973 "all units were in disarray, there was a lack of manpower, . . . shortages." According to Tra, mid and
lower level cadres, seeing the enemy "winning many new victories," concluded "that the revolution was in danger." [49] That did not mean, however, that the Viet Cong had been totally destroyed.

The estimate of relative strength that appears in Colonel William Le Gro's study Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation indicates that local forces of one kind or another still made up a substantial portion of communist strength in South Vietnam, particularly outside of Military Region I. Although the Viet Cong constituted only 16.9% of total communist combat troops in January 1973, local forces provided more than 50% of the administrative and service personnel. In Military Region III, local forces supplied 20% of the combat troops and 68.8% of the administrative and service personnel. In Military Region IV the percentages were 40.7 and 92.3 respectively. [50] The ARVN Chief of Staff for II Corps estimated that in 1975 communist regular units constituted no more than 46% of the forces he faced in his area. [51]

Such estimates indicate that Viet Cong strength after Tet had recovered far more than advocates of the conventional war thesis would have one believe, particularly in the heavily populated region of the Mekong Delta and the area surrounding Saigon. Furthermore, estimates such as Le Gro's are of military strength, and they do not appear to include the communist political infrastructure. Although the Viet Cong had been devastated at Tet and hard pressed afterward, they had not been destroyed.

The strength and value of local irregular forces would become apparent in 1975 when the communists began their final offensive. Although the American military has used irregular forces in mounting a conventional attack, it does not rely upon aid from guerrilla forces, popular militia, and political cadres in the enemy's homeland to facilitate and sustain the offensive movement of its regular forces. In Vietnam in 1975, however, communist regulars were not only dependent upon the aid received from irregulars, but their success was the result of years of unconventional warfare that had severely eroded the will and fighting ability of their anticommmunist opponents. To call the communists' 1975 offensive "conventional" completely ignores both the events that had made the offensive possible and the role of irregular forces in supporting the final attack.

In assessing the successful campaign in the South, Generals Giap and Dung claimed that "everywhere regional forces, militia, guerrillas and self-defense units seized the opportunity to hit the enemy." They gave local forces credit for having "seized control in many places, wiped out or forced the withdrawal or surrender of thousands of garrisons, shattered the coercive machine of the enemy at the grassroots level, and smashed their 'popular defense' organizations." The result of that activity was "better conditions for our regular units to concentrate their attacks on the main targets of the general offensive." [52] General Tran Van Tra described the 1975 offensive in a similar way, noting the use "of combined forces--both armed forces and the political forces of the people--in a widespread general offensive and uprising." Tra claimed that the
communists "prepositioned" regular forces "in each area, in coordination with extensive local [forces] and militia" to create "an extremely potent revolutionary people's war."[53]

Communist descriptions of specific battles during the 1975 campaign also noted the involvement of irregular forces. According to General Tra, the successful attack on Phuoc Long province that preceded the 1975 offensive was the work of two "understrength" divisions, "in combination with the local forces," and he noted similar cooperation between local and regular forces in the Mekong Delta at the time of the general offensive.[54] Further north, according to General Dung, the liberation of Tam Ky and Tuan Duong, and the defeat of the 4th and 5th regiments of the ARVN 2nd division on March 24 and 25 was the result of attacks by the 2nd division of Zone 5 "in coordination with regional forces." He also gave credit for the liberation of the northern part of Quang Ngai province to "regional forces, in coordination with the masses."[55] Dung and an official history published in Hanoi both noted the coordination of regular units with attacks by local forces in other battles in Zone 5, including the attack on Danang.[56] Interviews with RVN officials and military officers confirmed the important role played by communist irregulars, sustaining the conclusion that ARVN forces in III and IV Corps were so "hard pressed and tied down by local Communist forces" that they "could not be disengaged to form reserves to meet the fresh enemy divisions moving down from the north."[57]

Irregulars were particularly active as the communist attack converged on Saigon. In 1972 communist forces in the Mekong Delta had not supported the offensive elsewhere, and RVN units from IV Corps had been used to reinforce III Corps. According to the ARVN Commander of the Capital Military District, in 1975 the communists "tied up those troops by the activities of the local Communist forces." Later those same local forces moved in captured vehicles into Long An province to threaten Route 4 and support the offensive against Saigon.[58]

General Dung also noted that in the provinces surrounding the city local forces at all levels increased in size and engaged in "continuous activities" that "tied down and drew off a number of enemy main-force units in IV Corps" and elsewhere, while "special action and sapper units" worked within the city.[59] Another communist history noted the way in which local forces helped to create "a staging area for our main-force units" by their attacks on "outposts, subsectors, and district capitals."[60] A specific example of such an attack, in which guerrillas surrounded an enemy post at Bo Keo, appeared in the diary of Tran Ham Ninh, aide to General Vo Van Thanh, commander of the column attacking Saigon from the south.[61]

According to General Dung, following the fall of Saigon, in the Mekong Delta and throughout the southern region the communists "mounted a series of attacks under the direct leadership of the local party branches." He claimed that by "coordinating these attacks with uprising by tens of thousands of the masses, they liberated all cities and towns, captured all big military bases, all district towns and subsectors, and all
enemy outposts."[62] Although General Tra's claim that "the spirit of the masses were seething" and the statement in an official communist history that "in addition to the military attacks, millions of people arose" in the final days of the campaign may well be exaggerations,[63] the important work of communist cadres and irregulars in the 1975 offensive should not be underestimated.

In addition to the role that irregulars played in intelligence gathering, logistical support, and combat, communists at the local level engaged in significant political activity directly supporting the 1975 offensive. Giap and Dung observed that local political forces "carried out a campaign of agitation among enemy ranks to bring about their disintegration," helping to destroy the agencies of enemy political power and helping "set up revolutionary power in various locations."[64] General Tra claimed that during the offensive "many villages set up revolutionary administrations," and General Dung noted that by the time of the attack on Saigon "our political infrastructure existed in every section of town." Inside the city, he wrote, "there were dozens of members of the municipal party committee and cadres of equivalent rank, members of special war committees, hundreds of party members, thousands of members of various mass organizations, and tens of thousands of people who could be mobilized to take to the streets."[65]

The cadres and their followers not only took political power as the offensive proceeded and the Saigon government collapsed, but they acted in advance to undermine the morale of the enemy's armed forces. Tran Ham Ninh referred in his diary to "coordinating combat and the proselyting of enemy troops," and according to General Dung, during the attack on Saigon people within the city "used megaphones to call on Saigon soldiers to take off their uniforms and lay down their guns." Such popular action, wrote Dung, "created a revolutionary atmosphere of vast strength on all the city's streets."[66]

To call the communist offensive in 1975 a conventional attack one must ignore the numerous references in communist sources regarding the important contribution made by local forces and political cadres. One must also ignore statements in which Vietnamese communists specifically characterize the attack as one falling outside the traditional category of conventional war. General Tra, for example, maintained that the 1975 offensive was "not a plan to launch a general counteroffensive . . . as in a regular war." Instead, it embodied "parallel military and political efforts."[67] General Dung described the campaign as one in which "our forms and methods of fighting and style of attack bore the spirit of the rules of revolutionary warfare in the South," and the March 1975 description of the attack provided by the Politburo in the midst of the campaign described it as a "general offensive and general uprising." By "coordinating offensives and uprisings" the communists saw themselves "striking from the outside in and from the inside out."[68]

In describing their defeat in interviews after the war, officials and officers of the RVN stressed their own failures in ways that also emphasized the unconventional aspects
of the war. Their stories of panic, disorder, demoralization, defeatism, paralysis, and incompetence seemed to confirm the communist view that the war was won as much by political and diplomatic maneuvers as by military ones. According to the RVN respondents, the collapse of the South was caused more by internal problems that had developed over many years than by the weight of the final communist offensive. General Tran Van Don lamented the "incompetence on our military side," while another anonymous respondent spoke of "lazy, corrupted and unqualified generals." The Speaker of the House, Nguyen Ba Can, believed that by 1975 there existed a "psychological collapse that struck every South Vietnamese," seen, among other things, in the "widespread" draft dodging noted by Buu Vien and other officials. Despite strong communist pressure, leaders were "unwilling or afraid to take any initiative."[69] The problems described by the ARVN officers and government officials, including the abandonment of South Vietnam by the United States, were the results of years of protracted war and not a function of the final communist offensive. The 1975 attack was the coup de grace of a successful people's war rather than the coup de main depicted in many recent American accounts.

Although the 1975 communist offensive relied upon regular units attacking in very conventional ways, the descriptions of the offensive by the men who directed it and by those who tried to counter it indicate that the communists were definitely not engaging in conventional war as that term is understood in the United States. American conventional war doctrine does not anticipate reliance upon population within the enemy's territory for logistical and combat support. It does not rely upon guerrilla units to fix the enemy, clear lines of communication, and maintain security in the rear. And it certainly does not expect enemy morale to be undermined by political cadres within the very heart of the enemy's territory, cadres that will assume positions of political power as the offensive progresses. Yet all of these things happened in South Vietnam in 1975, and to call the offensive that orchestrated them a conventional attack, as that term is normally understood in the United States, is to misunderstand the reasons for communist success. As William Duiker has observed, "the fact that the 1975 campaign was primarily a military offensive should not obscure the fundamental reality that the Party's success over a generation was attributable, above all, to nonmilitary factors."[70]

Despite the evidence contradicting their views, some people will no doubt continue to believe that North Vietnamese communists conquered South Vietnam with a conventional strategy. That interpretation of the war, carrying with it the implication that the United States might have won in Vietnam had it recognized at the onset that the conflict would be a conventional one, explains the American failure in a way that does not mandate significant change in the future. If the United States military was fighting the wrong kind of war, rather than fighting the wrong way, then future problems of a similar kind can be solved without retooling and retraining. By ignoring facts that do not fit their interpretation, leaders and followers alike can thus avoid the reassessment of doctrine and policy that a significant defeat ought to stimulate.
To learn from the American experience in Vietnam one must understand the nature of the war that was fought there. At no time was it a conventional war; from beginning to end it was a people's or revolutionary war in which both irregular and conventional forces played important roles. It was also not a war between North and South; it was always a conflict between Vietnamese communists from all parts of Vietnam and anti-communists, also from all parts of Vietnam but located geographically in the nation's southern half. Although the communist war effort was directed from Hanoi and depended on northern as well as southern resources, the war was fought and won in the South by the application of a strategy incorporating political and diplomatic as well as military struggle over a prolonged period of time. In short, it fit the model of people's war articulated by both Asian theorists and their Western interpreters. The conflict ended in 1975 after a communist offensive by regular units and local irregulars quickly demolished a dispirited opposition worn down by more than a decade of protracted war.

Long after the war, in 1988, General Phillip B. Davidson concluded that "our defeat in Vietnam has taught us nothing."[71] If that pessimistic conclusion is true, then certainly some of the blame must rest with those who refuse to recognize the true nature of the war. No matter how much people might wish to believe that the communist strategy of people's war failed in Vietnam or that communists from the North conquered the South in a conventional invasion, those views are not well supported by the evidence. To understand the war, one must first abandon the view that the conflict was a war of aggression, North against South, and recognize that the communist triumph was the result of the successful implementation of a strategy of people's war.

Unfortunately, to learn from the past one must have more than an accurate historical assessment. For accurate histories to be of value, people must be willing to accept them, and that will often require the rejection of more comfortable interpretations which buttress existing preconceptions or allow institutions to avoid rigorous reassessment and reform. To date, the agony of Vietnam remains too vivid for many people to make the conceptual readjustment needed to understand America's longest and least successful war. Until that readjustment is made, one can only hope that an ignorance of the past does not condemn the American nation or its people to repeat the agonies of Vietnam in some other place at some future date.


[13] Ibid., p. 180


[22] Giap, *People's War*, p. 146. Although it denied the legitimacy of such views, the United States government recognized them, quoting passages from Giap and others in a section entitled "North Viet-Nam: Base for Conquest of the South" in Department of State Publication 7839, *Aggression from the North: The Record of North Viet-
[23] Chinh, Primer, p. 211.


[32] The early years of Vietnamese communism are described fully in Huynh Kim Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945 (Ithaca, 1982). See also Duiker, Communist Road to Power, chs. 1-5.


[42] Ibid., p. 343.

[43] Ibid., p. 195.


[48] See, for example, "Directive 10/CT-71" and "Recapitulative Report on the Reorientation Courses Concerning the New Situation and Missions Conducted" in *Viet Nam Documents and Notes, Number 102, Part III* (Saigon, 1973).


[54] Ibid., pp. 132 & 147.


[56] Ibid., p. 109 and War Experiences Recapitulation Committee of the High-Level


[58] Ibid., p. 232.


[61] Ninh's diary entries are in Tra, *Vietnam*, pp. 178-185. The guerrillas surrounding Bo Keo are noted on p. 178.


[70] Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, p. 319.


Return to Home Page

Last updated: Nov. 2002
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