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Technology and Strategy: The War in Vietnam

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Technology and Strategy: The War in Vietnam

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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Abstract

From the Battle for the Ia-Drang Valley in 1965 to the final withdrawal from the American Embassy in Saigon in 1975, the helicopter was an integral part of American forces strategy in the Vietnam War. The focus of this study is to view the helicopter as a tool of military strategy, more than a piece of hardware. My thesis is that the helicopter enabled the search-and-destroy war waged by American forces against the North Vietnamese forces. This is part of the overarching theme which we see developing in American military history during the post-WWII era: an over reliance on technology to wage wars, often to the neglect of strategy. This article details the adoption of the helicopter by the US Army, explores how air-mobility played a role in the Vietnam War, and ultimately offers perspective on the relationship between technology and strategy in the modern era.

In Saigon, 1974, South Vietnamese nationals and their families crowded around the embassy, struggling to be on one of the last American helicopters out of South Vietnam. With the withdrawal of American military support in early 1973, Saigon had fallen to the Communist North Vietnamese forces, and anyone who had supported the South Vietnamese or the Americans were desperately fleeing the capital city. The Vietnam War forever changed American perspective on war, protest, the military, and government. Prior to Vietnam, America had never - in the public perception - lost a war. The American withdrawal from the Vietnamese theater is forever etched into the collective memory of the American citizenry, government, and military.

Technology played a pivotal role in the War, more so than in previous conflicts. In the post WWII era, the United States emerged as a global superpower capable of sustaining a massive military-industrial complex. This force was necessary to wage the large-scale force-on-force conflict that it fought in WWII and in Korea, and that it was prepared to fight against the Soviet Union. Vietnam was the first truly-unconventional war in which the US was engaged, being fought against enemy combatants who intermixed themselves with the population and did not wear uniforms. As a result, the US had a massive technological superiority over the enemy who did not have the military-infrastructure of a large state like the Soviet Union or the Axis Powers had. However, this has led to the US being reliant upon its technological superiority in order to win battles. This trend began in Vietnam, as the US still relied on its domestic manufacturing capability as it had during the previous conflicts, and has continued to this day. Currently, the study of the impact of technology on warfare centers around current events and recently developed technology: drones, satellites, and

surveillance technology. This is the result of the last fifteen years of continuous war in the Middle East, which has inarguably been a catalyst to the development of military technology as a whole. The vast majority of the study on the technology in Vietnam exists in academic writing was conducted in the 1970s and 1980s.

The helicopter was integral to the tactical, operational and strategic level operations in the fight against the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong forces. The US' reliance on the helicopter in Vietnam is but one example of the general trend of the military's over reliance on technology in warfare. The more recent literature is not mired in the Cold War atmosphere which deeply colored discussions of the Vietnam War. Most modern study of the helicopter is found in compilation works centering around American military history, technology, or Vietnam; but there have been few recent works addressing the helicopter specifically as it facilitated the campaign strategy in Vietnam. The focus of this study is to view the helicopter as a tool of military strategy, more than a piece of hardware.

Powered flight of any kind was unattainable and impractical until the development of gasoline powered engines in the early 20th century. Many inventors, such as Thomas Edison, had attempted to construct a helicopter. Even the Wright brothers tried – although they gave up after deciding the concept had “no future.”¹ While there were practical models which preceded it, the XR-4 was the first truly practical helicopter built in the United States- its first contract being awarded to Sikorsky in 1942.² The development of the helicopter continued throughout the Second World War, and helicopters were employed by both the Axis and the

¹Ralph P. Alex, *How Are You For Fixed Blades?*, in *Vertical Flight*, ed. Walter J. Boyne and Donald S. Lopez (Smithsonian Institute: Washington D.C., 1984), 22.

²*Ibid.*

Allies, although not on any large scale. The Vietnam War was the first war in which the helicopter was utilized as a transport vehicle for soldiers in large numbers or in an offensive capacity. The only significant use of the helicopter prior was the use of the Bell-47 as a medical-evacuation vehicle in the Korean conflict during the 1950s, made famous by its appearance during the opening credits of the popular sitcom *M*A*S*H*.³ The historical question is whether the availability of the air-mobility in the Vietnam War drove the strategy, or if the strategy drove the demand for new technology. I believe that the availability of the helicopter enabled the overarching strategy of attrition which the US Army waged against NVA and FLA forces in Vietnam.⁴

However, the helicopter was not *the* deciding factor in the strategic choices in Vietnam. Air-mobility was not central to the strategy which the President and his Defense Department eventually pursued, but came as a result of it, as the strategic/political level planners make decisions that more often have indirect impacts on the battle space. The helicopter was a vital part of the American strategy at the operational level, and aided battlefield commanders in launching operations that would have otherwise required roads, or foot insertions into areas unreachable by wheeled or tracked vehicles. The availability of the helicopter allowed the Army to pursue its overarching strategy of attrition in Vietnam, by making it easier to maintain contact with the enemy. In the context of Pentagon politics, the helicopter was important for the Army to control more of the battle space than it would have had it not developed its own organic airpower. The helicopter had significant effects on the

³Popular CBS sit-com which ran from 1972-1983, featuring the antics of the doctors and nurses of the 4077th Medical Army Surgical Hospital in Korea.

⁴The NVA is an abbreviation for the North Vietnamese Army, and FLA, or Freedom Liberation Army, here after will be referred to as the Viet Cong, or VC.

decisions made by military commanders in Vietnam, as it opened up the possibility of entirely new operations and forever changed the landscape of the modern battlefield.

The widespread use of and reliance on the helicopter by American forces is indicative of a much broader theme: the over reliance on technology by the American military. This being such a broad theme in American military history, the scope of this paper is limited to the Army's adoption and use of the helicopter in Vietnam, and the Army's ground war in Vietnam.

The primary sources principally stem from official US Army documents, such as the findings of the Howze Tactical Mobility Board.⁵ The Howze Board was an official inquiry set into motion by the Pentagon in 1962, in order to determine the viability—financially, logistically and practically—of creating an air-mobile force borne into battle by helicopters. Official documents allow a high-level perspective behind the “Big-Army's” thought process in selecting and applying the helicopter in their theater strategy in Vietnam. Other primary sources range from personal memoirs of General Westmoreland, commander of US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV) from 1964 to 1968, as well as other soldiers and pilots who had company grade experiences during the War.

The secondary sources draw extensively from the large body of research and study conducted immediately following the war during the 1970s and 1980s, when most of the study on the Vietnam War took place. More recent scholarly studies have taken place, although most of the study on the helicopter are smaller sections of larger compilations. The majority of the secondary analysis is done by political scientists, historians and foreign policy

⁵US Department of the Army, U.S. Army Tactical Mobility Requirements Board: Final Report, August 20, 1962.

experts. Experts hailing from these fields bring a diverse set of biases and perspectives to the study, though they tend to fall into two distinct categories. Contemporaries of General Westmoreland and high-level planners tend to take defensive postures of the war strategy, as they all had hands in its execution and planning. Political scientists, scholars and most others are highly critical of the war strategy and the campaign goals of the war as a whole; this group is in the majority.

The Vietnam War was America's first "modern" war, with all the recognizable elements which Americans today— now accustomed to watching combat footage in their living rooms—recognize as elements of modern warfare: armored vehicles, automatic weapons, combat fatigues, and now helicopters. The helicopter was as integral to America's first battle in Vietnam, in the Ia Drang Valley, as it was in evacuating the final Americans from Saigon in 1975. The helicopter was the only vehicle which could have successfully inserted troops into remote clearings in the jungles of Vietnam, and the only vehicle capable of facilitating the strategy of attrition so successfully. The American military's reliance on the helicopter was symptomatic of the broader reliance on technological superiority over the enemy. Within the context of the Army and a ground-war, this means the reliance on fire-support from the air and fire-support from artillery pieces.

Politics and War

At the onset of any military operation, there is a mission statement. A mission statement simply contains the "who, what, where, when, and the why" of the mission. A good mission statement is concise, contains a task and purpose, and gives clear guidance and direction to the organization. At the tactical and operational levels of the military, these

mission statements are written by commanders. At the national and strategic levels, missions are dictated by the civilian- political leadership. War is an extension of foreign policy, a tool for projecting will and power, and not an end unto itself (hopefully). During the Vietnam War, the goals of the political leadership were unclear, and unrealistic. The end state was to prevent the spread of communism, but how would this be measured? Was success in Vietnam a free and democratic South Vietnam, or was it just a South Vietnam who could keep the North in check? The ambiguous political goals of the war were, ultimately, what led to its failure.

The War in Vietnam was an extension of the Truman Doctrine, a post WW-II initiative planned by American diplomat George Kennan, that equated to a zero-tolerance policy for the spread of communism outside of countries already part of the communist bloc.⁶ Even in its own time, the Truman Doctrine—synonymous with the containment strategy—was criticized for not differentiating between nations of vital importance and those peripheral states whose political bent had little effect on the global balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union. The fatal flaw of the doctrine, which treated a communist revolution in Cuba the same as it would in Britain, is what brought the US military to wage war against an elusive enemy, halfway across the world, for nearly a decade.

Prior to the American intervention in the early 1960s, Vietnam had been a French colony. There was Vietnamese resistance to the French Colonial power in the region, which was partially manifested as the Communist-Nationalist movement led by Ho Chi Minh.

After nearly 80 years of colonization, the Vietnamese forces defeated the French at the

⁶Office of the Historian, “Kennan and Containment, 1947,” *MILESTONES: 1945–1952*, accessed May 16, 2016, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/kennan>.

infamous siege of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. After the withdrawal of the French in 1954, Vietnam was divided politically into the communist North, whose capital was Hanoi, and the democratic South, whose capitol was Saigon. When the communist state formed in the North, the United States became concerned that instability may take hold in Southeast Asia, and that a domino effect would cause communism to spread across the region.

The political goals for Vietnam were laid out by President Johnson in his address to the American people on April 7, 1965. In this television address, Johnson addressed the growing unpopularity of Operation Rolling Thunder, the codename given to the Air Force's bombing campaign over North Vietnam. President Johnson told the American people that we were in South Vietnam to "keep the promise" that we had made to protect its independence since the end of the Franco-Indochina War in 1954.⁷ In the speech, he lists several more reasons for our involvement, including a fear of the "domino effect" of communism spreading throughout Southeast Asia, starting with the fall of South Vietnam. President Johnson states that "our objective is the independence of South Vietnam and its freedom from attack."⁸ The below excerpt from the speech is somewhat ironic considering the level of US military involvement which would take place in Vietnam during the next 10 years.

Such peace[ful settlement] demands an independent South Vietnam -- securely guaranteed and able to shape its own relationship to all others -- free from outside interference -- tied to no alliance -- a military base for no other country.

These are the essentials of any final settlement.⁹

⁷Lyndon B. Johnson, "American Policy in Vietnam" (speech, Washington D.C., April 7, 1965), American Experience PBS, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/psources/ps_policy.html.

⁸Johnson, "American Policy in Vietnam."

⁹Ibid.

It is not a difficult parallel to draw between the war in Vietnam and the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

Both conflicts were characterized by a large, technologically advanced state invading a technologically inferior state. In Vietnam, the NVA and VC never won in a force-on-force conflict, and after the 1968 Tet Offensive they avoided such battles with US forces completely. As General Westmoreland acknowledges in his memoir, *A Soldier Reports*, "in the face of American airpower, helicopter mobility, and fire support, there was no way Giap (commander of the NVA) could win on the battlefield."¹⁰ Similarly, in Afghanistan the Soviets were unable to overtake the Mujahideen, who waged a guerrilla campaign and forced a Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The Mujahideen were funded in part by the US: just as the Soviets had funded the Communist North during the US-Vietnam war. In Afghanistan, as in Vietnam, technology alone was not enough to secure victory.

The Vietnam War was the proving ground for the concept of air-mobility and its potential was fully realized by the end of the conflict. Vietnam's most lasting legacy, as far as the US Army is concerned, is the application of the airmobile concept and the helicopter. The ability to place soldiers in the field at nearly any given point on the map greatly expanded the options open to battlefield commanders, and proved to be particularly useful when fighting an enemy that refused to be static. North Vietnamese forces waged a guerrilla war against the large, comparatively cumbersome American forces who relied largely on their technological advantage. To characterize the war succinctly as a war of attrition, or as an anti-insurgency, does not do justice to the complexity of the conflict and is—to an extent—a simplification

¹⁰William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 405.

used by historians to describe Vietnam.¹¹ These characterizations may be true for certain campaigns, or for periods of the war, but it is important to note that there were significant military initiatives that were more comprehensive, and conducted outreach programs to the populace.

Interservice Conflict and the Cold War Army

Before we can discuss *how* the helicopter was so influential on the American strategy in Vietnam, it is important to understand *why* the helicopter was adopted in the first place. Additionally, it's important to understand why the Army—whose primary area of responsibility within the Department of Defense family is to conduct unified-land-operations—by and large was the service that fielded the largest number of helicopters in Vietnam. The helicopter's ability to fill a wide range of roles— enabled by its ability to land without an air strip and hovering capabilities— made it ideal for operations in the rice-paddies, jungles and villages of Vietnam. However, in order for the Army to field the helicopter it had several political battles to face.

The Cold War Army was forced to fight for resources, combat-roles and funding with its sister service the Air Force. The interservice rivalry and power struggle with the Air Force made the Army's decision to adopt the helicopter a matter of politics as well as practicality, as the acquisition would expand the Army's role on the battlefield, as well as its budget. The prospect of having an organic aircraft which could minimize the Air Force's role in the Army's ground war, combined with the practicality of the machine itself, made the helicopter—and air mobility—the path forward for the Cold War Army. The conflict stems from their

¹¹Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

separate roles, and cultures which began forming when the Army first acquired powered aircraft in the early 20th century, and culminated in the creation of a separate Air Force entirely following WWII.

The Air Force was created by the National Security Act of 1947, which split the Army Air Forces (AAF) from the Army, creating the Air Force as a separate branch of the military. There had been political pressure for an autonomous Air Force since the formation of the predecessor to the AAF the Army Air Corps (1926-1941), especially as the missions of many aircraft no longer had any direct support role for the Army's ground forces.¹² The National Defense Act granted the AAF the autonomy it had wanted, however the Army retained a small fleet of fixed-wing aircraft for troop-transport and close air-support, while the Air Force took over the strategic-bombing, heavy transport, and air-superiority roles.

These roles were established in negotiations within the Department of Defense that were conducted in Key West, Florida, in 1948.¹³ The final output of this conference was the document entitled "Functions of the Armed Forces and the Joint Chiefs of Staff," which delineated the roles of the separate services.¹⁴ The Army was authorized only whatever aviation assets were considered "organic."¹⁵ The Air Force, aside from the primary air-superiority role, was to "furnish close combat and logistical air support to the Army, including air lift, support and resupply of airborne operations, aerial photography, tactical reconnaissance, and the interdiction of enemy land and communications."¹⁶ The Army lost

¹²US Army, "Army Air Corps," accessed May 18, 2016, <https://www.army.mil/aviation/aircorps>.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴US Defense Department, *Functions of the Armed Forces and the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, April 21, 1948, <http://cgsc.cdmhost.com/cdm/ref/collection/p4013coll11/id/729>.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid, section IV.

control over the AAF completely, and was left with a fleet of fixed-wing aircraft used mostly for observation and directing field artillery. The Key West conference put the Air Force on equal footing bureaucratically with the Army, and left the Army in a position without many organic air-assets until they seized upon the helicopter as their primary air transport.

Dr. Ian Horwood, a military historian published by the Combat Studies Institute in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, discusses the interservice conflict between the Army and the Air Force in his book, *Interservice Rivalry and Airpower in the Vietnam War*.¹⁷ Horwood posits that the Army seized upon the airmobile concept—and the acquisition of the helicopters required for the airmobile concept—as a means of retaining resources and authority within the Department of Defense.¹⁸ Additionally, the Air Force was focused on its bombing campaign in North Vietnam, and had little interest in supporting the Army’s ground campaign through providing significant close air support or light tactical transport. What air-assets were available were difficult to coordinate, and therefore many times late to engagements which often lasted only several minutes. The Air Force did retrofit C-47 cargo planes for close air support by fitting them with Gatling-guns, but the amount of “spooky” aircraft (as they were nicknamed) was not enough to fully support the Army’s ground mission.¹⁹ These roles were instead taken upon by the helicopter, which the Army used to fill the role which the Air Force was unable or—more likely—unwilling to fill as it focused its own resources on developing its bombing campaign in North Vietnam.²⁰

¹⁷Ian Horwood, *Interservice Rivalry and Airpower in the Vietnam War* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006).

¹⁸Ibid, 89.

¹⁹Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 279.

²⁰Horwood, *Interservice Rivalry and Airpower in the Vietnam War*, 89.

Horwood and many other scholars attribute the Army's quick adoption of the helicopter as a means of regaining its former air-transport and support role from the Air Force in a move driven by Pentagon politics. Morton Halperin, a foreign policy expert who served on the Department of Defense during the Johnson Administration and the Vietnam War, has argued that the helicopter was adopted in order to fill the close air-support role assigned to an Air Force which did not field any such aircraft to fill the role.²¹ In his article entitled "The Key West Key," authored in partnership with his son David Halperin in 1983, Halperin asserts that the helicopter's vulnerability to ground fire, cost, and high volume of losses made it less effective than fixed-wing aircraft.²² He cites that nearly one-third of the helicopters in the fleet were lost over the course of the War as the primary evidence of its ineffectiveness.²³ Halperin believes that the helicopter was in place due almost solely to the interservice politics inside the Pentagon.

Undoubtedly, the prospect of regaining the air-support and some transport role heavily influenced the Army's adoption of the helicopter. Within the Pentagon, the services' bureaucracies exist in a state of anarchy in which they are constantly struggling in a zero-sum game for funding. Halperin also asserts that the helicopter's many roles would have been better filled by fixed-wing aircraft. Fortunately for the US Army, Halperin had no hand in decisions of military strategy. The helicopter, by all accounts but Halperin's, was an invaluable tool in the war in its roles as an attack, support and transport aircraft. Its ability to fly only hundreds of feet off the ground, hover, and take off in limited terrain, made it able to

²¹Morton and David Halperin, "The Key West Key," *Foreign Policy*, No. 53 (1983): 114-130, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1148563>, 119.

²²Ibid, 120.

²³Ibid, 115.

provide air-mobility into restrictive terrain that would have been impenetrable to fixed-wing aircraft, which always require a landing strip to land and take off from. Indeed, the helicopter is the only aircraft which could have transported soldiers into the swamps of the Mekong Valley, the highlands, and the dense jungles. As I will discuss in subsequent sections, the helicopter was vital to the Battle for the Ia Drang Valley, and the subsequent airmobile strategy which the Army utilized in its search-and-destroy mission during the rest of the war.

The Howze Tactical Mobility Board

During the Cold War, the US Army had not been training to fight an anti-guerilla campaign deep in the jungles of South-East Asia, but a conventional, almost rehearsed war against the mechanized hordes of Soviet soldiers who were expected to cross from East into West Germany at a moment's notice. Primary evidence of the Army's Cold War mentality is found in the Howze Tactical Mobility Board, as it denotes heavily that the US was still preparing to fight a large-scale conventional war in Europe, and not an anti-guerilla campaign in Vietnam. The Howze Board, or the *U.S. Army Tactical Mobility Requirements Board: Final Report*, records the results of the Army's months long study into the role of Army aviation and aircraft requirements moving into the 1960's.²⁴ The report is written for the highest levels of leadership in the US Army: the Chief of Staff, the Secretary of the Army, and the Commanding General of US Continental Command, the forebear of the modern day Army's Northern Command.

The report has a bias in affirming the validity of the airmobile concept, as the Army was actively seeking to acquire airmobile capabilities and bar the US Air Force—which had

²⁴US Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Tactical Mobility Requirements Board: Final Report*, August 20, 1962.

potential to strip the Army of parts of this role— from acquiring it. Interservice bias is theme which pervades military materiel acquisition in the US, which oftentimes can be a struggle between services when their roles overlap. The report is largely a document which makes acquisition and force restructure recommendations based on what the Army felt was necessary moving forward into the Cold War. The report does acknowledge the limitations of the role which the helicopter can accept, and calls for a review of Air Force requirements in supporting the Army’s ground mission. The report fully supports the airmobile concept, the acquisition of millions of dollars worth of helicopters, and the formation and training of two airmobile divisions. Eventually, these came to fruition in the form of the 11th Airmobile Test Division, and later the 1st Cavalry Division which was reactivated and absorbed most of the 11th’s resources and personnel.²⁵

The Army does acknowledge the possibility of fighting an insurgent force directly in the Howze Board Final Report. General Howze found that the US had the possibility of fighting four types of hostile forces: a “modern army,” an “oriental” army, insurgents, or “other”— a term which the Howze report uses to encompass all other regions that were not currently in the US sphere of interest, such as African nations and Latin America.²⁶ This finding does not prove that the entire mindset of the Army was geared towards counterinsurgency. Indeed, the recommendations in the report were read by select few personnel, however it does bring to light that the Big Army had at least considered fighting counter insurgency. That being said, the Army decidedly trained and prepared to fight only a

²⁵Horwood, *Interservice Rivalry and Airpower in the Vietnam War*, 112.

²⁶US Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Tactical Mobility Requirements Board*, 14.

conventional war moving into Vietnam and there were few resources devoted to counter-insurgency training.

The Board ultimately decided the force-structure of the Army, creating airmobile divisions and stationing them across the globe, and made air-mobility the way forward for the Army in Vietnam. Horwood's work draws heavily upon the Board in discussing the interservice rivalry that led to the acceptance of the helicopter as its air vehicle of choice. Additionally, the Army transferred all of its fixed-wing assets to the Air Force in 1962, the same year of the Howze Board Final Report.²⁷ This left the helicopter as the only option left for retaining any role providing its own air-support of any kind, and in having any "organic" air assets allowed it by the Key West agreement from 1948. Ultimately, the findings of the Howe Board have had far reaching effects felt well past the American withdrawal from Vietnam, as the helicopter remains the Army's preferred method of transportation today.

Turning Point: The Battle for the Ia Drang Valley

By 1965, the 11th Air Assault Test Division had been re-designated as the 1st Air Cavalry Division. The reason for this re-designation is simple: the Army prides itself on tradition. An Army unit is never truly disbanded, but rather it is "deactivated," so that in a time of war it can be reactivated and its heritage survives. The pre-1965 1st Cavalry Division was re-flagged as the 2nd infantry division, and the 1st Cavalry moniker was transferred to the 11th Air Assault division, presumably to liken the helicopter and air-mobility to the horse and cavalry of the frontier wars.²⁸ This is indicative of the Army's vision for the use of the helicopter, in that it would be used to bare shock troops into battle to overwhelm the enemy

²⁷US Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Tactical Mobility Requirements Board*, 14.

²⁸Horwood, *Interservice Rivalry*, 124.

with speed and mobility, as the horse-soldiers of the American Civil War had. This was done so that in 1965, the Army had re-branded the air-mobility concept supported by the Howze Board, and tested extensively between 1962 and 1965, as an “elite” Army unit, having heritage with both the airborne units of WWII, and the heavily romanticized horse soldiers of the late 19th century.

The helicopter had already proven its capability as a medevac platform during the Korean conflict, and air mobility had been tested in peacetime, but it was not until 1965 that the 1st Cavalry Division and Air mobility was tested in combat. The Battle for the Ia Drang Valley, which occurred in mid-November 1965, was the first large scale confrontation between American forces in a strictly combat-role and the NVA. The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment (1/7th) had orders to conduct air-assault operations in order to search out and destroy the enemy in the Ia Drang Valley.^{29 30} The battalion was airlifted by 16 UH-1D “Huey” helicopters into landing zones, where they subsequently made contact with the enemy and engaged in a firefight that lasted over three days. The resultant battle was a victory, in that the battalion managed to kill an estimated 634 enemy soldiers while losing 79 of their own troops, according the official After-Action-Report (AAR).³¹ However, at the conclusion of the battle the battalion was extracted back to their home base in the vicinity of Pleiku, and held none of the territory they had sacrificed 79 men to take hold of and retain through heavy enemy fire. This sort of action would characterize much of the military action

²⁹Department of Army, Headquarters, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), *AAR of Battle for Ia Drang Valley, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry*, Oral transcript of OPORD given by LTC Moore.

³⁰An After Action Report is conducted following any military exercise, in order to determine what actions went well and should be repeated, and what actions need to be improved.

³¹Ibid, 17-18.

in Vietnam, in that territory—no matter how high the cost paid for it—was abandoned after enemy contact had ended.

The helicopter lends itself easily to this type of battle, in that it is not designed to sit and hold ground, or defend an area. Its strength lies solely in its agility, in that it is meant to land and take-off quickly: it is lightly armored and cannot afford to linger in landing zones. This is unlike a tank or armored vehicle, which can withstand direct fire. The helicopter's lack of ground capability influenced the attritional strategy in Vietnam in that it does not lend itself to holding to territory as much as, say, a tank.

The AAR shows that the helicopter did survive its combat trial, and performed all the tasks asked of it. COL Moore, the commander of the 1/7th, praises the men and equipment of the 229th Medical Evacuation Battalion who provided air support to the 1/7th during the operation. The 229th kept his men resupplied in the field, and the crews were able to land under enemy fire to conduct resupply operations. The value of the helicopter was also crucial as a direct action platform, providing fire support to soldiers on the ground as evidenced by another excerpt from the AAR below.

Aerial Rocket Artillery is extremely effective especially if the pilots know the exact location of the enemy... It has a tremendous shock effect on the enemy. The thing about ARA that makes it more effective than artillery is the fact that it does not have to be seen by ground observers to be adjusted... Quick accurate fire support is the result."³²

The Battle for the Ia Drang was recognized immediately as having proved the validity of the airmobile concept, and was the lessons learned were disseminated across the Army. In a letter dated January 7, 1966, COL William Becker—the commandant of the Army Artillery School

³²Department of Army, *AAR of Battle for Ia Drang Valley*, 19.

at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, refers to the Battle for the Ia Drang as “a classic battle,” meaning that it will be held up as an example of what a textbook air-assault mission looks like.³³ COL Becker continues to state that “air-mobility was the difference between the brilliant victory won, and the probable loss of the initial force had it not been built upon rapidly by air assault units.”³⁴ The value of the helicopter is without question, based on the language of Colonel’s Moore and Becker.

The precedent set by the 1/7th and LTC Moore impacted Army doctrine on air assault through the rest of the war. COL Becker’s estimation that the Ia Drang would become a “classic” battle proved to be correct: to this day the battle is held up as an example of what an air assault should look like. The availability of the helicopter made the air assault strategy possible, a fact which is obvious. However, an air-assault is a tactical or operational procedure, and does not factor directly into the national foreign-policy level of planning. The policy goals of President Johnson, as summarized in his speech from April 7, 1965 and analyzed in the previous section, would likely have remained the same irregardless of whether the Army had adopted the helicopter or had chosen to rely on air support from the Air Force.

At the level at which the executive branches of government operate, the military is a gargantuan tool which they may apply in an effort to achieve political goals. The concern of the executive and policy making should generally not be the specific means and equipment which the military uses to achieve its goal, with obvious exceptions to this being weapons of

³³COL William Becker to MG Harry Critz on Jan 7, 1965, in *AAR of Battle for Ia Drang Valley, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry*.

³⁴Ibid.

mass destruction or other weapons with additional ramifications if they are used. The helicopter was not a factor at the broad political level, however it was absolutely vital to the Army planners tasked with executing the ground war in South Vietnam. In this, we see the difference between political strategy and military strategy. Military planners in Vietnam were asked to use the military to achieve political goals, as the military so often is.

The Battle for the Ia Drang proved not only the validity of air-mobility, but also demonstrated the American reliance on technology to wage wars. COL Moore discusses how the quick resupply and the fire support was the only difference between success and failure of his mission. His operation, no matter how well planned, relied on the technological superiority which his unit held over the NVA forces. It would be a foolish commander who would not take advantage of material superiority over the enemy, however technology can be relied upon to the point of being a fault. It is a general perception of the Vietnam War—in the view of many scholars—that the American military did not have a strategy, besides that of attrition and destruction of the enemy. Compared to the NVA and Viet Cong forces—who relied on small arms, systems of tunnels and their ability to blend into the population—the US forces in Vietnam were cumbersome, slow to react, and reliant on technological superiority to decisively win engagements. Reliance on technology proved to influence the American strategy of search-and-destroy, as the strategy relied on the helicopter to bring as much firepower and personnel to bear against the enemy at any given point. In this way, the technology drove and was a deciding factor in the tactical and operational level of strategy but not theater/national level, as discussed earlier.

Precedence of Strategy

Military planners in Vietnam had envisioned the War to unfold like the more recent conflicts which the US had fought on the Korean peninsula and in Europe. In these types of conflicts, there were large ground campaigns between conventional forces, the enemy wore uniforms and behaved somewhat predictably. The unconventional forces which the American military were forced to engage for the majority of the Vietnam Conflict created a need for American forces to react or alter their doctrinal tactics, techniques and procedures with which they had trained. However, the body of scholars who have studied American strategy in the War have found that military planners failed to adapt their conventional mindset to effectively fight North Vietnamese forces. The helicopter having taken on new roles in the Vietnam conflict allowed military commanders to plan their strategy knowing that they had the helicopter available. This being the case, it was utilized in the same way that it would have been within the context of a more conventional conflict.

There is a great deal of scholarly research which has been done to explain the broader trends in American military history. This section will highlight the most prominent historians who have written on the topic, their theses and how their works are pertinent to Vietnam. I will then place my thesis within the conversation which these gentleman have been having over the course of the past several decades.

Military historian, former Professor of History at Temple University, and lauded author Russell Weigley's *American Way of War* is a history of American military strategy which chronicles the United States military strategy from a general perspective.³⁵ The larger

³⁵Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973).

theme of his book is that in its military strategy spanning history, the US has made its objective to annihilate enemy forces completely, rather than to seek less total—and therefore less costly—victories.³⁶

In the early years of America’s involvement in Vietnam, American forces were still characterized as being in an advisory role to the South Vietnamese Army. Weigley attributes part of the “mission creep”³⁷ and increased military activity to the aggressive nature of the American military culture.³⁸ Weigley states that throughout America’s history, US forces rarely remained in a defensive posture when more aggressive avenues were available to them.³⁹ The focus of American strategy shifted early in the War from advising and supporting South Vietnamese forces to denying the enemy freedom of movement and emerging into an active combat role. This, in turn, translated into increasing offensive operations in South Vietnam, and ultimately shifting the strategy of the War from a limited advisory role to a committed war against the enemy.⁴⁰ Weigley’s thesis revolves around the continuing American tradition of total victory, which he defines as complete destruction of enemy forces, applied in Vietnam.⁴¹ The discrepancy between Weigley’s thesis, of American forces seeking total destruction, and the political goals set forth by President Johnson, which was to contain the North Vietnamese threat, is clear. The pervasive American mindset being that “the best defense is a good offense,” is a common heuristic that has guided American foreign

³⁶Weigley, *American Way of War*, 463.

³⁷“Mission creep” is the gradual increase of military activity, which often began as an advisory or supporting role, over a period of time.

³⁸Norman Schwarzkopf, later the Commander of CENTCOM during Desert Storm, was an adviser to South Vietnamese forces during his first tour of duty in Vietnam in 1965 and his later career was heavily influenced by his experiences in Vietnam.

³⁹Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 464.

⁴⁰Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 464.

⁴¹Ibid, 466.

policy in the post-WWII era. The helicopter even transformed itself from a utility aircraft in Korea to an offensive weapon during Vietnam, as it took on attack and transport roles, bringing to fruition the above heuristic.

Robert Schulzinger's *A Time for War* provides a general overview of the US path to war.⁴² Schulzinger argues that American technology drove the strategy for the war as much as logic.⁴³ He asserts that since the new technology saved American lives, planners also believed it would be effective in other roles; additionally, that the campaign rested on America's ability to out manufacture enemy forces.⁴⁴ Succinctly put, Schulzinger states: "the US fought the war it did because it possessed abundant air power, mobility, technology, and firepower."⁴⁵ Similar to the "logic" which Schulzinger posits governed the strategy in tandem with technology, Palmer argues, in *The McNamara Strategy and the Vietnam War* that Robert McNamara's leadership led to quantification of the war, almost akin to keeping score of a basketball game except instead of tracking baskets, the score is comprised of casualties.⁴⁶ McNamara's rationalist strategy is an extension, and one of the consequences, of bureaucratic "logic" that may make sense from a Washington perspective, but not necessarily to servicemen in theater.

Dr. Krepenevich's *The Army and Vietnam* addresses the doctrinal choices made in Vietnam, and the logic employed in reaching those decisions.⁴⁷ Krepenevich poses the idea

⁴²Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁴³Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 182.

⁴⁴Ibid, 182.

⁴⁵Ibid, 183.

⁴⁶Gregory Palmer, *The McNamara Strategy and the Vietnam War: Program and Budgeting in the Pentagon, 1960-1968* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978).

⁴⁷Andrew Krepenevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986).

that the US was prepared to fight a large scale, conventional war in Vietnam just as it had in Korea, and WWII. These victories affirmed the conventional methods of war in the American military's mindset as being the avenue for success in conflict, and became "deeply embedded in the service's psyche, conventional operations held sway over the Army even as its civilian superiors lost faith in their effectiveness," as Krepenevich phrased it.⁴⁸

The strategy of attrition in Vietnam was the strategy by default, and Krepenevich explains the rationale behind it at length, using both reasoning directly from the mouths of American generals, as well as historical rationale. The historical rationale, which is more directly from the mouth of Krepenevich than the generals, is summarized in the quote below.

The sheer weight of American materiel and resources seemed sufficient to the military leadership to wear down the North Vietnamese and their VC Allies; thus, strategy was not necessary. All that was needed was efficient application of firepower. It had worked against the Japanese and the Germans in World War II and had worked against the Chinese in Korea. It would be tried again in Vietnam.⁴⁹

The American forces in WWII and Korea had fought to hold territory, to seize and to defend ground. However, American forces in Vietnam rarely held ground once it was captured, electing to return to their base. This technique supports Weigley's thesis that Americans have historically fought for complete destruction of enemy forces. In contrast, Krepenevich in the quote above fails to take into account the effect that actually holding objectives and terrain had on America's previous conventional wars. There was generous application of military materiel in Korea and WWII; the winners of these wars were decided almost as much by the domestic manufacturing capabilities of each nation as their military or strategic prowess.

⁴⁸Ibid, 165.

⁴⁹Ibid, 466.

Krepenevich's thesis, that American military forces rely on overwhelming technological superiority to win their wars, is well founded. Tactically, American strategy in Vietnam centered around trying to bring about its fire superiority to bear against the enemy. Most often, the difficulty was simply in trying to locate, make, and maintain contact with the enemy. However, Krepenevich's excerpt above is a gross oversimplification of American strategy, which was more comprehensive. General Westmoreland's memoir—a summary and further analysis of which is in the following section— details his threefold strategy which included offensive operations, training ARVN forces, and pacification of the civilian population.⁵⁰ However, the offensive search-and-destroy operations are what received most of the public's attention—as well as the helicopter.

An important distinction which I believe that these scholars fail to make is that between military and political strategy. Krepenevich, Weigley, and Schulzinger—in broad terms—state that the American strategy was reliant on overwhelming firepower. However, they discount entirely the civil programs which were a part of the American presence in Vietnam.

A Soldier Reports: General Westmoreland's War in Vietnam

Perhaps one of the most important primary sources available on the war comes from one of its architects, General Westmoreland, in his memoir on the Vietnam War, *A Soldier Reports*. Westmoreland largely blames the results of the war not on his command but rather on the American media portrayal of events in the war and the failures of the civilian leadership. His writing focused on the internal political struggles he faced in fighting the war:

⁵⁰Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 14.

this is where he believed the war was lost. His memoir is useful for looking at the political struggles faced by the Army in Washington. Westmoreland emphatically defends the conduct of American service-members throughout his account, at no point placing blame for the defeat on them or their actions. All of the blame for the results of the conflict is diverted to external sources, however he reserves none of the blame for himself.

The bias in General Westmoreland's work is clear, as his tone often borders on defensive. This source provides a high-level, strategic explanation of the ground campaign in Vietnam unlike many other sources written by company or field grade officers. The perspective of a general officer in understanding the conflict, especially one of the architects of the battle strategy, is invaluable to the study of the war as a whole, but particularly useful to the search-and-destroy campaign which was waged against the Viet-Cong and North Vietnamese Army. Westmoreland, at several points in the book, discusses how the strategy of the War might have changed had the political winds shifted.

The war still could've been brought to a favorable end following defeat of the enemy's Tet offensive in 1968... had President Johnson changed our strategy and taken advantage of the enemy's weakness to enable me to carry out operations we had planned... doubtless the North Vietnamese would be broken.⁵¹

The above excerpt is one example of Westmoreland's characterization of the war. First of all, it is indicative of a prevailing theme of his memoirs that the war was winnable.

Westmoreland firmly believed that, given more latitude in fighting the war and more control, the Army had the resources and ability to fight and win the war.

⁵¹Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 410.

Westmoreland pins the blame for Vietnam on several failures. First, he blames the political leadership. Their faults lie in the micromanagement of the war, and the lack of clarity in their goals for Vietnam. Additionally, he explains that the lack of transparency with which President Johnson portrayed the War contributed to the public outcry to end the war. This ties heavily into the media portrayal of the war, which lost Westmoreland the support of the people. Westmoreland blames the lack of a unified command, as he explains that there were essentially five separate “commanders”—CINCPAC, COMUSCAV, and the American ambassadors to Thailand, Laos and South Vietnam—instead of a single unified command who could have successfully operated under broad political guidance.⁵²

Westmoreland envisioned a strategy for the war which he called a combined military-political effort. He had three main goals: clearing out the insurgents in order for the civilian agencies to operate, securing the region, and then conducting offensive operations.⁵³ However, the focus of his efforts were the offensive operations, which he simply calls “search-and-destroy,” a term which the media used to characterize the war effort, and which was accurate in describing combat operations, but not necessarily the entirety of the efforts.

Perhaps the clearest example of strategy driving technology within Westmoreland’s memoir is that of the helicopter-gunship. American forces relied on close air-support during ground operations, especially during the larger scale engagements which occurred prior to the Tet Offensive. Westmoreland explained that it was Washington policy that American fighter-pilots could only provide air-support with a Vietnamese pilot on board.⁵⁴ He continued to

⁵²Ibid, 410.

⁵³Ibid, 35.

⁵⁴Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 86.

explain that ground troops believed that “they could count on quicker support from US Army helicopters, even though in those days there were no true helicopter gunships.”⁵⁵ During this period, the standard UH-1 “Huey” helicopter was jury-rigged by ground crews with additional armaments in order to facilitate the Army’s need for dedicated ground-attack aircraft. In this way, the strategy—in this case using helicopters as fire support— led to the development of new technology. Dedicated gunships materialized in Vietnam when the Cobra attack helicopter came into service in 1969, following the demand for such platforms.⁵⁶

I generally agree with Westmoreland’s assessment of the War, in that it was largely the political leadership that caused the failure, not the military strategy. The lack of validity and reliability of the South Vietnamese government perceived by Westmoreland is also a larger factor in the lack of success of the war. Most scholars agreed with the public’s reception of the work at the time it was published: Westmoreland shouldered none of the responsibility for ramping up the War effort and puts the blame onto the media and politicians. There are more recent analysis that has been more favorable towards Westmoreland’s command and strategic objectives in Vietnam.

Conclusion: Technology and Warfare

The availability of technology determines the limitations and capabilities of Armies, and is a significant factor in determining what strategy to pursue. The Mongol hordes under Genghis Khan conquered East Asia utilizing the horse in battle. During WWI, the tank enabled the Allies—and the Central Powers—to break the stalemate of trench warfare. In the

⁵⁵Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 86.

⁵⁶Ibid, 87.

modern context, drones allow remotely piloted aircraft to observe battlefields, follow terror cells, and launch missiles onto targets on the opposite side of the globe. War is a catalyst to technological developments, as the perceived need for new equipment, weapons and transportation drives their production and development. In Iraq and Afghanistan, we have seen the rapid development of observation drones and an increased reliance on their capabilities for intelligence gathering and—later in the conflict—direct strike capabilities. Similarly, the helicopter evolved from a utility role into attack and direct action roles as the Vietnam war progressed and developed.

The helicopter was the US Army's aircraft of choice for a number of reasons. Pragmatically, the vehicle made sense. It was the only aircraft capable of inserting troops deep behind enemy lines, replenishing their supply deep within the confines of the jungle, and providing dedicated close air support. Bureaucratically, the helicopter allowed the Army to retain its own "air force," stripping several roles—along with funding and authority—from its sister service from the US Air Force.

The airmobile concept was quickly validated early in the war by the actions of the 1st Cavalry Division during the battle for the Ia Drang Valley in 1965 and from then on the helicopter was the primary vehicle for troop transport in-country, medical evacuation, and became the preferred vehicle for close air support within Army units. From that point forward, the Army would continue to pursue the airmobile concept as one of its primary efforts towards fighting the North Vietnamese forces. The Ia Drang was a key battle for the advancement of air-mobility, as it proved the validity of the helicopter in direct combat roles,

and the helicopter continued to provide support the American forces throughout the rest of the war.

Although the helicopter did not have a direct influence on political strategy and goals in the region, it did impact military strategy; which is only a means of executing political goals. The war was lost through ambiguous political goals and Cold-War rhetoric. The helicopter was integral to the tactical, and operational level combat operations in the fight against the NVA and VC forces by facilitating the search-and-destroy operations which the US Army primarily pursued in its ground war in South Vietnam. This strategy would come to characterize the public perception of the war, and be synonymous with an attrition strategy which the media and politicians attributed to General Westmoreland. However, as Gregory Daddis points out, Westmoreland's strategy was more encompassing and included civil-support operations and an extensive ARVN training mission. The widespread use of and reliance on the helicopter by American forces in Vietnam demonstrates the trend in American military of over reliance on technology, to the exclusion of sound political strategy.

As the US moves forward into new fields of technology, we must be wary of looking to new weapons and surveillance equipment for the answer to our foreign policy woes across the globe. We cannot “carpet-bomb” or air-assault our way to peace, or stability. The end state in Vietnam—stability—was not able to be achieved through force of foreign arms, no matter how effective or influential any new piece of technology may be. Technology is inherently limited to not only the skill of the end-user, but the government who deploys the equipment to achieve its political goals.

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