

The background of the cover features several stylized, light green leaf motifs scattered across a pale yellow-green gradient. These motifs are positioned in the top left, top center, top right, middle right, bottom center, and bottom left areas.

THE ART OF INSURGENCY

**American Military Policy and the
Failure of Strategy in Southeast Asia**

Donald W. Hamilton

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The Art of Insurgency

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*American Military Policy
and the Failure of Strategy
in Southeast Asia*

DONALD W. HAMILTON

Foreword by Cecil B. Currey

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For

Stephanie Ruth, Joshua Lawrence, and Brian Alexander

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Foreword

Writing about Vietnam has been around since the earliest days of American involvement there, a veritable cottage industry. There are literally thousands of books that discuss one aspect or another of that conflict. While many of them are both interesting and illuminating, most are not particularly helpful in deriving knowledge of why the American enterprise there failed so badly.

The concentrated analysis and study of the conflict is not as old and has had a much thinner production. There were, of course, the writings of theoreticians/practitioners of the art of People's Wars of National Liberation—old-line revolutionaries such as Regis Debray, Mao Tse-tung, Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, Truong Chinh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and others. Despite the fact that it was once popular to own copies of their works, few of those in authority actually ever read them, and even fewer understood them.

There were other books, few and far between, that made their way into print that actually tried to pinpoint the problems that were causing such an upheaval in our armed forces as they struggled in Southeast Asia. My own list of the most essential of those writings includes:

Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War* (1957). One of the earliest studies that tried to understand the nature of conflicts that did not involve massed armies and divisional movements to contact with an enemy. Osgood pointed out the necessity for a different approach to such warfare.

Robert Taber, *The War of the Flea: A Study of Guerrilla Warfare, Theory, and Practice* (1965). An insightful author, Taber wrote that “the

specifically modern aspect of guerrilla warfare is in its use as a tool of political revolution—the single sure method by which an unarmed population can overcome mechanized armies, or, failing to overcome them, can stalemate them and make them irrelevant” (pp. 131–32).

J. A. Pustay, *Counterinsurgency Warfare* (1965). An early and earnest effort to understand irregular warfare and how to defeat its proponents.

John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War: The Strategy of Counterinsurgency* (1966). Another early work—we had been in Vietnam in large numbers only since April 1965—that took a serious look at the problems inherent in guerrilla counterinsurgent conflicts.

Julian Paget, *Counterinsurgency Operations: Techniques of Guerrilla Warfare* (1967). Used for a time by the U.S. military, this was a practical guide to combating irregular troops.

William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (1968). A Marine lieutenant colonel who wrote of the Corps’ Combined Action Platoon program in I Corps, and how that fairly successful approach to pacification was ultimately dismantled.

William J. Lederer, *Our Own Worst Enemy* (1968). Lederer wrote of the corruption and sleaze that accompanied America’s presence in Vietnam and the incomprehensible wastage of our logistical shipments.

Carl F. Bernard, *The War in Vietnam: Observations and Reflections of a Province Senior Advisor* (USACGSC, paper, 1969). An Army lieutenant colonel, Bernard saw keenly one of the major problems caused by the direction U.S. forces took in Vietnam: “The U.S. continues to concentrate the bulk of . . . resources and military might on controlling the terrain and looking for massed enemy formations. The VC continues to concentrate its talents on controlling the people. Each succeeds.” No one listened to this sensitive and brilliant officer.

Ward Just, *Military Men* (1970). A scathing indictment of the higher echelon of rank within the American military establishment.

John T. McAlister, Jr., *Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution* (1970). This author, among other things, lamented the vast ignorance Americans had of the history and culture of Vietnam. Nor could we talk with people we were supposedly there to help. With few exceptions, we had no linguistic experts capable of speaking with their Vietnamese political or military counterparts. McAlister told how it was not until his senior year in college at Yale in 1957, that he prevailed upon the faculty there to institute the nation’s first university-level course in the Vietnamese language—only eight years before two Marine battalions swarmed ashore on the beaches of Da Nang. That first course had three students!

Even as late as 1968 the military had little linguistic capability. Thousands of officers and enlisted men could now “order a meal in a restaurant or tell somebody where to carry a bundle.” Only a few, however, could “discuss the nuances of politics and security with the peasants let alone the generals” (p. viii). And those who could were ignored. In Vietnam we were as mute as Balaam’s ass.

Michael T. Klare, *War Without End: American Planning for the Next Vietnams* (1972). While the war still raged, this author wrote of the endless complications derived from our strife in Vietnam and of the implications for the future.

Edward L. King, *The Death of the Army* (1972). An Army lieutenant colonel who despaired over the lack of progress of the war in Vietnam and what participation there had done to the cohesiveness, morale, and readiness of the U.S. military.

Edward Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American’s Mission to Southeast Asia* (1972). A major general in the Air Force and a sometime CIA agent, he was America’s most successful and knowledgeable expert on counter guerrilla strategies, who once proclaimed that “no responsible government, responsive to the needs of its own people can ever be overthrown.” His work in the Philippines and his early days in Vietnam lent credence to his observation. Despite his real world experience he had long been ignored by those in power.

Stuart Loory, *Defeated: Inside America’s Military Machine* (1973). This work delved deeply into the deterioration of morale within the military during the 1960s and early 1970s. The root cause of that decline was caused, he believed, by our involvement in Vietnam.

William L. Hauser, *America’s Army in Crisis: A Study in Civil-Military Relations* (1973). An Army lieutenant colonel at the time he wrote this book of mild criticism and a *defender* of the system, he still felt impelled to say that “widespread allegations of manipulation of statistical indicators, unseemly pursuit of rank and decorations, and ‘ticket-punching’ careerism—even if some of the critics appeared to have come into court with unclean hands—are too damning to be ignored” (p. 185).

Jeffrey S. Milstein, *Dynamics of the Vietnam War: A Quantitative Analysis and Predictive Computer Simulation* (1974). An operational research and systems analysis (ORSA) approach to understanding the situation in Vietnam. It received little attention.

Maureen Mylander, *The Generals: Making It, Military Style* (1974). Having interviewed dozens of men holding flag rank, she lamented that “to become a general, and particularly to become a high-ranking one, an

officer must conform, avoid error, shun controversy, and forego dissent." Such a system did not bode well for its own health.

Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers* (1977). A retired brigadier general who had served in Vietnam, he asked "Why didn't the military leaders at the top speak out?" (p. 116). Why didn't he? According to his book, nearly 70 percent of army generals who served in Vietnam were uncertain what the objectives of that combat were. Over 50 percent believed the United States should not have participated in the conflict. An even 61 percent believed that McNamara's famous "statistical indicators of success" were nonsense (pp. 25, 154, 164). Yet the Green Machine rolled on.

Richard Gabriel and Paul Savage, *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army* (1978). Both were Army Reserve field-grade officers who criticized a system that turned those who bear the burden of combat against their own self-seeking, high-ranking officers, who either did not or would not share the dangers of contact with the enemy.

Cincinnatus [Cecil B. Currey], *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army During the Vietnam Era* (1981). A controversial book written when I was an Army Reserve lieutenant colonel. I believed then, and do so still today, that the military disaster in Vietnam grew out of ineptitude at the top, and that the Army made too many mistakes in its years in Vietnam. If those same errors are not to be repeated in some future conflict (and some were, in Panama and in Grenada), their sources need to be identified, understood, and corrected. At some point, I wrote then, for reasons believed to be good, America's army will once again be sent into battle. The outcome will be unfortunate if the Army closes its eyes to the lessons of Vietnam and again experiences a debacle (Preface, *passim*).

Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (1986). A solid and thoughtful description of the problems faced by the Army in Southeast Asia and how those self-inflicted wounds came about.

Others might differ with some of my selections and would create a different list. This, however, is mine. And, despite their worth, most of them missed the essential mark. They detailed the collapse of morale, or the end of unit cohesiveness, or the scandals uncovered, or analyzed tactics used, or criticized the lack of knowledge about Vietnam. There was too little analysis in almost all of them of the nature of insurgency itself. Only one or two actually looked at the conflict in Vietnam and tried to analyze it for what it was—to extrapolate its essential character and to distill its essence—and so to come to a full and complete understanding of what we faced there.

We began with such confidence. It would all be over soon. In 1966 General William Childs Westmoreland commented spiritedly: "We're going to out-guerrilla the guerrilla and out-ambush the ambush" (*Life*, 11 November 1966). He was wrong. Clearly we did not achieve his goal. And just as clearly, the United States lost the conflict in Vietnam. In the aftermath there was no surge of investigation to learn what had gone wrong. Sir Robert Thompson spoke for many observers when he wrote: "The lessons of the past in Vietnam and elsewhere have just not been learnt" (*No Exit from Vietnam* [1969], p.129–30).

Although much has been made of it and doctrines written to explain it, even the Army's decades-long concentration on low-intensity conflict (LIC) has not brought about a sufficient awareness. A lieutenant colonel instructor of mine at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College once said to me that "My God, man, in the latter years of the Vietnamese experience the Army was almost unusable. It had a fantastic breakdown in cohesion. Discipline was . . . absolutely shot. We didn't have a unit in the U.S. Army by late 1972 or early 1973 that really was at all usable. . . . Despite what the army officially claims, the lessons learned and the expertise gained in Vietnam all took place at a higher level of intensity. So today they talk about how to use helicopters, how to use armor, how communications are employed, how to resupply in the jungle, and so forth and so on."

He continued. "Unfortunately, none of these things have any relevance in a real low-intensive situation. They fought a mid-intensity war and called it a low-intensity one. . . . So what the Army doesn't understand even yet is that it lost the war at a level it doesn't even see. What we did and what we learned . . . sure as hell won't help us win another Vietnam-type conflict. . . . The worst problem is that it will only be another couple of years before anybody with real insight into what went wrong in Vietnam will be out of business" (1977).

This book gives us a chance finally actually to do so. It is high time, for even President George W. Bush assured us that "We have learned the lessons of Vietnam." He was incorrect. Those lessons were not grasped in their entirety nor understood in their particularity until Donald W. Hamilton set them forth in this book. Drawing from men as disparate as Jomini, Clausewitz, Liddell Hart, Sun Tzu, and dozens of lesser-known authors, and adding his own keen insight, Hamilton demonstrates that the Army's understanding and definition of "insurgency" has changed little since 1962—more than thirty years ago—despite the Vietnam experience.

The military's understanding of insurgency was flawed in the beginning and has remained so until now. Hamilton's book corrects this

defect. Thus Hamilton's first important assumption, that the American military has no valid concept of insurgency that is either singular or clear. His second essential assumption is that the global security of the United States after 1945 demanded a formal doctrinal approach to the nature of insurgency itself rather than using incomplete and catch-as-catch-can measures year upon year. Thirdly, Hamilton insists correctly that there was not one but two insurgencies in Vietnam after 1945, both of which had a negative influence on U.S. military policy. Failure to understand these three factors, he concludes, has meant confusion for scholars and disaster for policymakers.

In noteworthy fashion, Hamilton discusses insurgency as a "method" and as a "type" of warfare. His analysis is clearly superior to anything yet written. I have been studying the Vietnam conflict for twenty-two years. Without any reservations, I believe this to be the best book I have yet seen on this subject, and I have read most of them.

Professor Hamilton, who currently teaches at Mesa College in Arizona and is an Army Reserve officer, has worked on this text in his civilian capacity for twelve long years, correcting, adding, polishing. He sets forth a splendid analysis of insurgency itself, followed by brief and adequate examinations of the insurgencies in the Philippines and in Malaya following World War II. He then discusses the American involvement in Vietnam and tells why it was flawed from the beginning. His conclusion is a sobering one—we have not yet learned to deal properly with such uprisings: "Third World subversive insurgent regimes have little to fear from a post-Vietnam America, and even less to fear from a post-Gulf War America."

Since at least 1973 the Army has contented itself with the old German explanation of why that country lost its contest with the Allies in The Great War. Their Army was "stabbed in the back" by unrest at home and by political interference. Many Americans have resorted to the same answer about Vietnam. The record set by the U.S. military in listening to more complicated explanations has not been a good one. It has inevitably reacted defensively. It has assailed the motives and character of those who have criticized it. It now has another opportunity to listen, to study, to make necessary changes. If the Army remains unwilling to accommodate itself to the lessons set forth by Professor Hamilton, then as a nation we have little hope that in the next real conflict we will do any better than we did in Vietnam.

Cecil B. Currey
Lutz, Florida

Preface

For nearly fifteen years now I have been pursuing questions related to the elusive concept of *insurgency war*, the past twelve of which I have spent writing this book. I always try to keep in my own mind, as I try to impart to my students, that answers are often less important than the sharpening of questions. Too frequently, particularly in an American society which expects ever decreasing response time, we look for the quick and fast answer before we have defined the real question. It is almost as if immediate response proves one's worth in knowledge, and therefore the validity of the question posed. This process in turn leads to a cycle of immediate responses based on inaccurate questions. What is worse, the results become a series of false conclusions stacked on top of one another. Many of those things that might otherwise be explained appear as "phenomena," and because our ability to problem solve is faulty, we continually add to what astronomer Dr. Carl Sagan might have referred to as our "demon haunted world." More than not, such conclusions pass for wisdom—a truly unfortunate occurrence in a society that must learn to clearly redefine many of its important questions today if its own future is to continue as productively as much of its past has.

One of these important questions surrounds the concept of insurgency. It is not an overemphasis to state that just how we come to understand strategic concepts of insurgency will either strengthen or weaken our nation in the future. We might surmise from the ancient Chinese philosopher and strategist Sun Tzu, that war, though political in nature, does not need to be destructive in policy, whether foreign or domestic. Yes, insurgency has its violent overtones, just as all forms of warfare have. Truly understanding war, however, allows a nation to

design its outcome and manipulate its purpose and use. For this to happen with insurgency it must then be perceived as viable strategy. But why insurgency?

Although this is not the place for a detailed discussion of the concepts of nation-building, it is important to note that those nations not interested in nation-building need to get out of the business of being a nation. This actuality results in two particular contemporary problems for Americans. First, the United States has a long history of reacting to war, even being surprised by it. Understanding insurgency means having to develop a more subtle posture, becoming more "proactive" without being militaristic. It means a foreign policy that can strategically influence nation-building in a direct fashion without appearing to do so overtly. Insurgency is strategy that does not need to be destructive, but, through understanding, time, and patience, can be used as a tool for building and reinventing. Second, insurgency has relevance which is primarily equated historically with nation-states that have not only achieved dominance throughout their own particular world, but have also achieved an apparent conclusion to their own state of existence, be that of the Roman Republic during the first century B.C., or the United States at the end of the twentieth century A.D. Examples of such magnitude are good because they offer us a clearer glimpse into the actual process of insurgency at other, less tangible, levels. I do not mean to be so morose as to intimate that the American way of life (whatever that may be) is coming to an end, because such life is cultural and therefore a symptom of the society, or the nation-state as a whole, and is always in a state of generational flux. Insurgency has little to do with cultural transitions, and exists in spite of any generational flux. This is an essential point because we must understand that insurgency is not a symptom, but rather a driving force in the collective self-determinism associated with nation-building.

What I speak more completely about is what social thinker Alvin Toffler might refer to as *wave theory*, essentially the idea that global transformation is linked between, and within, all societies. These waves are representative of different levels of societal transition that are occurring simultaneously and directly affect the collective self-determinism of each society. The one thing I believe to be consistent with such societal transitions—for example, that which might be represented by clashes occurring between and within *Second Wave* (industrial-based) and *Third Wave* (information-based) societies—is that insurgencies are the most likely political-military conflict to occur under such conditions. The fact that Americans are moving through this transition today is what makes understanding the strategic design of

insurgency more relevant than ever before. Moreover, not only is America dealing with this political-military occurrence, but many of its contemporary and future allies are as well. Unfortunately, the real complexity may not be with understanding insurgency, but in being able to manipulate its design.

While many factors emerge as to the reasons for a decay in collective self-determinism at the height of a nation's own progress, none are more critical than those relevant to insurgency. Let me explain. When the kind of political environment exists that makes possible insurgencies, usually ambivalence, forming out of antipathy, fear, or a combination of the two, permeates the collective consciousness of the people. Insurgency as a way to achieve political satisfaction, particularly for a minority organization looking to evolve in power, will strike both from within and from without a nation. This, in turn, often hastens the decay of that nation's collective self-determinism. Nations are always attempting to answer questions about where to proceed, especially when the society has apparently achieved an end, and usually when the perceived threat to the national interest is least. This is when collective self-determinism no longer has the meaning it once did. When that self-determinism shifts within a nation, when revitalizing the nation-state appears to provoke a change in course that is not perceived as evolutionary, then the prospects for confronting insurgency rises.

Americans should look at their experience in Vietnam as an opportunity to discover something about politics and war that many nations before them were seemingly unable to envisage. If anything, the experience in Vietnam has bought the United States time as a nation, time which is naturally running down. Americans are perhaps now reaching a point of critical understanding about the lessons of Vietnam as related to contemporary foreign and domestic policy, yet, are still in the midst of trying to determine just which lessons are the most significant. Understanding more precisely what insurgency is, its theoretical and applied importance, will help develop a relevance in its meaning, and, perhaps, alter the significance of lessons from the Vietnam past. Doing so is critical, and the responsibility falls equally upon the shoulders of both the American military and civilian political body.

The lessons from Vietnam are more easily seen in a political-military context because of the nature of the war itself, something that was more revolutionary/civil in design, and emphasized warring conflict between people who believed themselves to be oppressed and disenfranchised. Because of my background as a military officer, and because I have been a student of warfare most of my life, I more naturally gravitate toward an understanding of military strategy and

tactics. With this said, I do believe an equally aggressive study concerning the civilian political community and its relationship to insurgency war must also be undertaken. My work is primarily focused on understanding insurgency as a *method* and *type* of warmaking. By no means do I intend this book to be another of those “last words” on the subject. However, I do hope it stimulates a desire on the part of Americans to ask better questions about just what insurgency means to the quality of their future as a nation. I have tried to make this study as readable as possible, both in length and in construction. Because of the general confusion which has evolved over the notion of insurgency war in the post-Vietnam era, my task has been a daunting one at best.

The inspiration for this work belongs to two particular people, namely Sir Robert Thompson, who has recently passed from us, and to Cecil B. Currey, who I trust is tending to his ranch in Montana. First, Sir Robert. His prolific output in the late 1960s, after success and failure in the realm of understanding insurgency, was a great stimulant to me. His writings are the most accurate, most overlooked, and least understood works to come from the American-Vietnam period. Being overlooked may have something to do with the fact that these works are not American, but British. Being misunderstood today is probably related to the same difficulties he had in being understood by the American advisory group in Saigon during the early 1960s. This is too bad because his words also represent some of the clearest and most important on the subject of insurgency war. I encourage all Americans to read his books, overlooking the dated political language we all eventually succumb to, and listen to his message. The message is timeless for those societies interested in perpetuating themselves as a nation-state.

Now to Cecil Currey. I would like to thank Professor Cecil B. Currey, a man who has given his life to service as a scholar-soldier. His brilliant writings have helped me directly and indirectly in the writing of this book. His seminal work, entitled *Self-Destruction*, has forged a path for many scholar-soldiers to walk. A number of works within the military during the post-Vietnam years attempted to make honest appraisal and recommendation, and to all of them the American people are indebted. Although Cecil Currey may not have been the first to walk point in this battle against ignorance, and in some cases deception, he may very well have been the first to succeed, certainly in the post-Vietnam American military. Such accomplishment did not come easy, and was only possible because Cecil Currey was not merely provocative in his observations and analysis, but correct. Such is the path—it has always been the path—that represents honor and integrity, truth and reality, one that only the “spiritual warrior” can understand and follow. I am forever grateful to

Cecil Currey, for his valuable suggestions and comments in private about my own work, and I am honored that he would find time to write a foreword to this book.

A work of this scope and complexity was not completed without the help of a number of people over several years, a larger number unfortunately than the space here allows for. However, I would be remiss not to mention a few of the key people that have professionally and personally offered their time. The seeds for my work began germination during graduate school, and several of my professors were particularly kind to me in their patience, understanding, encouragement, and mentoring.

Dr. Paul G. Hubbard represents a tradition of mentoring and scholarly stewardship in the highest order, a man whose solid principles and ideals continue to influence me to this day. His life-long dedication to learning history has been an inspiration to all who have had the pleasure to work with him. When much of my work appeared impossible to convey, his honest, penetrating questions directed me, and his unswerving belief in my ability to accomplish the task always drove me.

Dr. L. Christian Smith is an American folk historian in the truest sense. Clearness of thought, enthusiasm, wit, and wisdom were the things he conveyed to me. He is a man who brings depth and integrity to the meaning of teaching and learning. His confidence in my abilities was also a major influence in my pursuing this work. Through Chris I have been better able to accept the genius of what it means to simplify the complex, and to make the important obvious, not trivial.

Dr. Sheldon W. Simon, a political scientist who possesses a remarkable genius for his subject, has conveyed much of his own personal insight and wisdom to me. A scholar, analyst, and tenor of the first order, Dr. Simon encouraged me to evolve in my thinking about insurgency warfare, to go beyond historical perspective and discover a vision for pursuing contemporary and future policy change. To me, this is the true purpose of history, to be the vehicle for meaningful change.

Though these men did not always agree with all of my observations all of the time, they never attempted to crush creative inspiration, and especially what creative inspiration leads to. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to these three men who have provided so much for me in such a short period of time, indeed a clearness that has significantly added to the attributes of this work.

I also wish to thank the many research librarians and archivists from the Center for Military History, the Military History Institute, the National Archives, and the Imperial War Museum, among various university libraries, who have lent their time and help. Special mention