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The Academic Strategists and the Vietnam War

by

Nicholas J. Pappas

Let us not hear of Generals who conquer without bloodshed. If a bloody slaughter is a horrible sight, then that is a ground for paying more respect to war

Carl von Clausewitz
On War

Studying the lessons of the Vietnam era is not a matter of merely antiquarian interest; nor is it one of salvaging personal reputations. Rather, it is a vital concern for the future of the republic. What needs to be evaluated is the habits of thought that lead statesmen and soldiers to make the decisions of the 1960s. Doing this, one can then ask what salutary or perfidious habits persist or have been discarded.

Enough time has elapsed to begin the process of a fair and balanced discussion of a most emotional era. We can examine the Vietnam war as one war among many, subject to the same rules and principles of analysis, since the “perennial principles” of war and politics are not lists to be slavishly followed, but instead are reflections on the recurring features in history caused by the nature of men and regimes.

Perhaps the best analytical work thus far on the Vietnam war is Col. Harry G. Summer’s *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. Its major point is that the United States suffered from its lack of sound thinking about military matters. To some of those who were involved in both the academic and operational aspects of the war, the work has the effect of a powerful catalyst, bringing to life vivid memories of the classroom and the combats.

In a chapter entitled “Friction: the People” one particular passage jars the mind: “The student draft deferments, along with the decision not to ask for a declaration of war and not to mobilize our reserve forces, were part of a deliberate Presidential policy not to arouse the passions of the American people. The effect of this was that we fought the Vietnam war *in cold blood*. The cold-blooded approach was not unintentional. It was an outgrowth of the limited war theories that reduced war to an academic model. As we go back and read the writings of the political scientists and systems analysts on limited

war, they are noteworthy for their lack of passion. The horror, the bloodshed and the destruction of the battlefield are remarkably absent. Clausewitz warned about those who would 'exclude all moral factors from strategic theory and . . . reduce everything to a few mathematical formulas.'"¹

In *On Strategy*, Colonel Summers examines the perennial principles of war. He does so in a way that reveals his knowledge of the principles as manifestations of the permanent psychological makeup of human beings. That is, the principles must be applied not only at the level of nations, armies, and divisions, but to the field of action inhabited by privates, corporals, and lieutenants. Clausewitz warned us never to talk about such things outside the framework of bloodshed, lest we make the world of grand strategy, strategy, and tactics something it is not: antiseptic, sanitary, and salutary.

With this warning in mind, it is important indeed to turn back to the writings of the "academic strategists" of the 1950s and 1960s.

The rise of the "academic" or "civilian" strategists is chronicled in Bernard Brodie's *War and Politics*. He tells us that as a group they originated "almost entirely since World War II, mostly in the United States, and usually associated with institutions like the RAND Corporation . . ." as well as comparable activity in a few universities.²

The most notable contribution by these thinkers, Brodie contends, was the development of systems analysis, the goal of which "is to get the most tactical and strategic effectiveness for one's money."³ In spite of the lack of historical or philosophical depth on the part of these functionalists, Brodie gives their apotheosis, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, good marks on the counts of "rationalizing procurement for the armed services, at insisting on budgeting by functions rather than by services, and all the rest—including above all a marked enhancement of the meaningfulness of civilian control . . ." "⁴ He quickly adds, though, that McNamara was just as eager to get the United States involved in Vietnam as anyone else.⁵ "Having no ideas different from those of the military about how the operation should be handled, he had to let the latter do it their way, except for imposing certain important restraints upon them."⁶ The fact that McNamara came to realize that the whole thing was a terrible blunder "is a tribute to his general intelligence and also his humanity."⁷

This amazing statement raises a question. If McNamara had enhanced the meaningfulness of civilian control, why did the *military* "do it their way"? If civilians cannot make the fundamental political diagnosis underlying strategy or understand the relationship between ends (policy) and means (strategy), in what way can civilian control be said to have been enhanced? Further, McNamara's realization that the whole thing had been a terrible blunder could also be interpreted as an admission that he suddenly became aware that his—and most of the military's—approach to the Vietnam problem was flawed at the most serious point, at the level of political diagnosis. The

“civilian strategists” and their military pupils simply could not understand what the problem was with the conceptual tools at their disposal.

Since the intellectual atmosphere at the Department of Defense at the time was dominated by the writings of the civilian strategists, it is pointless to blame either the civilian leaders or the military. The “buzz words” were limited war, flexible response, cost-effectiveness, and counter-insurgency. And the way “up” was to know (perhaps by way of a masters degree) all about them. Now the strangest thing about this atmosphere was that one felt that if he *knew* the doctrine, the problem was somehow largely solved. For example, an expert grasp of the writings of Mao Zedong, Vo Ngyuen Giap, and their counterparts like Morton Halperin, James Cross, and Sir Robert Thompson made one a master of “counterinsurgency.” To define the problem intellectually was to solve it.

What caused this excessive rationalism? Using counterinsurgency as an example, one is perplexed at US efforts to define the Communist threat to South Vietnam as one of “insurgency” or “revolutionary war.” Certainly there was a sizable guerrilla (NLF) force in South Vietnam. But, as Summers points out, the “guerrillas in Vietnam did *not* achieve decisive results.”⁸ Rather, as he points out later, “. . . it was four North Vietnamese Army corps, not ‘dialectical materialism’ that ultimately conquered South Vietnam.”⁹

A second example is the American fixation with gradualism both on land and in the air. Summers makes the laconic observation that dividing the war into “phases” for the ground campaign, “committed the US Army in Vietnam to the *strategic defensive* in pursuit of the negative aim of wearing the enemy down.”¹⁰ Further, the civilian planners who thought up the air offensive produced a tremendous strategic impact—but “not on North Vietnam.”¹¹ Rather, the effects were to reinforce the idea of gradualism and finally divide and alienate the American people.

Counterinsurgency and compellence are perhaps the most novel strategic concepts of the Vietnam era. We say “novel,” not because they involve radically new techniques, but because they were thought to be the products not of classical theory, but the new science of politics wrought by the behavioral revolution.

Let us turn back the clock to observe a civilian strategist, Thomas Schelling, at work. One of his chief works was *The Strategy of Conflict*, which appeared in book form in 1960 and was part of the reading lists required for the “new” approach to strategy. In his first chapter, “The Retarded Science of International Strategy,” Schelling tells us that there are two broad schools of thought regarding conflict. On one hand we have those who think conflict is pathological and should be cured, much as a disease. On the other, there are those who “take conflict for granted and study the behavior associated with it.”¹² This division is further broken down between “those that examine the

participants in a conflict in all their complexity—with regard to both ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ behavior . . . and those that focus on the more rational, conscious, artful kind of behavior.”¹³ This latter school is searching for the “rules” that govern behavior in a “contest-winning sense.”¹⁴ This is the field called the strategy of conflict.

Interestingly, he points out, the term is taken from the theory of games, which distinguishes “games of skill, games of chance, and games of strategy, the latter being those in which the best course of action for each player depends on what the other players do.”¹⁵ He adds that this “is not the military usage.”¹⁶ Strategy, in the sense that Schelling is using it, is the application of game theory to international relations. As such it views most conflict situations as “essentially bargaining situations” and is less concerned with the “efficient application of force” than “the exploitation of potential force.”¹⁷

This is the beginning of his treatise on this “new” science of strategy. Schelling laments the paucity of scientific effort expended on terms like deterrence and limited war and lauds the efforts of research groups like the RAND Corporation and the Institute for Defense Analysis in filling this hiatus.¹⁸ Fortunately, he asserts, a new kind of inquiry called game theory gives promise of producing a scientific theory of strategy, one that involves not only the application of force but the threat of force.¹⁹

The Strategy of Conflict is a fascinating work, with discussions about zero and non-zero sum games, compelling threats, and implicit bargaining. It is the stuff that helped create the “climate of opinion” in which the strategists of the 1960s operated. Game theory took its place in the pantheon of political science right along with structural-functionalism and nation-building.

Brilliant and compelling as this climate was, it did not produce useful strategy. The drily understated criticism of the Vietnam strategy found in Summers’ *On Strategy* is telling evidence of the lack of prudential judgment by the “new” science.

After spending many years puzzling over the Vietnam era, one can finally make some assertions about the science of strategy leading to that conflict.

The good thing was the feeling of pride (which sometimes became *hubris*, but what principle does not risk corruption) in America’s role in the world and her willingness to use power in the pursuit of peace, order, and justice. American power, then, had an *end*, and the purpose was good and lawful. One of the mistakes of the “new left” historians is their inability to see this almost primitive impulse for what it was—pure youthful idealism. But idealism is not prudence.

The bad thing was the atmosphere of rationalism surrounding American political and military thought. Out of this ether emerged its avatars, the whole McNamara Pentagon and its academic mentors. The climate of opinion resembled Michael Oakshott’s description of Bacon’s approach to the art of research: “First it has a set of rules; it is a true technique in that it

can be formulated as a precise set of directions which can be learned by heart. Secondly it is a set of rules whose application is purely mechanical; it is a true technique because it does not require for its use any knowledge or intelligence not given in the technique itself. Bacon is explicit on this point. The business of interpreting nature is 'to be done as if by machinery,' 'the strength and excellence of the wit (of the inquirer) has little to do with the matter,' the new method 'places all wits and understandings nearly on a level.' Thirdly it is a set of rules of universal application; it is a true technique in that it is an instrument of inquiry indifferent to the subject matter of the inquiry."²⁰

True strategic thought must grapple not only with models of conflict and conflict resolution but with the perennial truths about men and regimes. That is why Plato and Clausewitz are sources of vicarious reflection on man, rather than bodies of rules and reifications. As Clausewitz humbly put it, "With psychological and philosophical sophistries no theory, no General, should meddle."²¹ In contrast, the gnostic pretensions of the academic strategists caused them to forget the supreme importance of the classical insights—at the level of both whole peoples and little platoons. One might even say that they preferred novelty and triviality to the curiosity about being and becoming which, incidentally, forms the subject of the first lines of Plato's *The Republic*, the first book of political science.

Rather than erecting trophies to lost battles and then conducting a decent withdrawal, the intellectual experts on war are in full attack on new fronts, ranging from defense expenditures to military training.²² The military should always be mindful of the work of political philosophy since, after all, strategy is one means to attain national political goals, and a political diagnosis of regimes is the underlying ground of military policy. On the other hand, true strategic thinking need not be deferential to a corrupted political science.

The Vietnam war was an intellectual's war. It was a conscious attempt to make war the rational instrument of state policy. In this sense, the academic strategists and their military proteges were trying, with the best of intentions, to apply the Clausewitzian dictum "War is the continuation of policy by other means." But there is a lot more to Clausewitz than that. Clausewitz's grasp of the irrational, the terrible, and the hidden psychological forces in men and nations rank him with Xenophon and Machiavelli. The academic strategists must be judged in the light of their own goals. They failed to do what intellectuals are supposed to do—think: they made strategy in the manner of Brahmins, without thought of bloodshed.

Notes

1. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 35.

2. Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 453.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 461.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 476.
 5. *Ibid.*
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 477.
 7. *Ibid.*
 8. Summers, p. 76.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
 12. Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 2.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. *Ibid.*, footnote.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
 18. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
 19. *Ibid.*
 20. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), p. 15.
 21. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, v. I, trans. by J.J. Graham (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1956), p. 101.
 22. See the pointed review of several new works of this genre by Eliot A. Cohen in the summer 1982 issue of *The Public Interest*, pp. 121-128.
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“An Army abroad is of little use unless there are prudent counsels at home.”

- Cicero—*De Officiis*. I.22