A COMMANDER'S VIEW OF THE WAR IN VIETNAM

Almost 40 months ago I last visited this hotel just before leaving for duty in Vietnam. I came to see General Douglas MacArthur.

General MacArthur said to me: "I see you have a new job. I know you realize that this new assignment carries with it great opportunities, but it also is fraught with hazards."

I now wonder whether this occasion is one of those opportunities or one of those hazards.

The situation in Vietnam has been accord the most intensive news coverage in history. As a result, Americans should have, by this time, their image of the war. The question is: How accurate is this image? Do most Americans fully appreciate the character of the war and its complexity? I hope today I can contribute to better understanding.

What kind of a war is being fought in Vietnam? How is it being fought? How is the battle going? What lies ahead? These are questions I will address.

The Vietnamese -- and we, their allies -- are involved in a total undertaking -- a single, all-prevading confrontation in which the fate of the people of Vietnam, the independence of the free nations of Asia, and the future of emerging nations -- as
well as the reputation and the very honor of our country are at stake. At one and the same time we must fight the enemy, protect the people, and help them build a nation in the pattern of their choice.

The real objective of the war is the people. If the enemy could take Saigon, or the heavily populated areas of the delta, or both, the war would be over. He lost his chance to do this two years ago, and I can promise you that his military tactics alone will not win him another opportunity. Yet, despite staggering combat losses, he clings to the belief that he will defeat us. An through a clever combination of psychological and political warfare, he has gained support both here and abroad which gives him hope that he can gain politically what he cannot accomplish militarily.

Many myths about the Viet Cong still persist and I hope I can dispel some of them here and now.

The pattern of conquest in South Vietnam is from the book of Mao Tse Tung. It is the standard three-phase pattern—the combination of subversive political cells, guerrilla units, and conventional military forces.

Between 1954 and 1963 political cells, trained and directed from North Vietnam, were installed throughout South Vietnam. At the same time, Hanoi directed that the Viet Cong begin recruiting and organizing guerrillas, and training them in terror tactics.
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By late 1964, the combination of enemy political-guerrilla warfare and governmental instability in the South resulted in a decision by Hanoi to enter the decisive and final phase. Viet Cong companies were formed into battalions, regiments and divisions, and North Vietnamese Army units began to infiltrate covertly into the south.

Never at any time during those ten years of subversion, terrorism and attack did North Vietnam relax its control over the war against the people of South Vietnam. The goal of this aggression was then, as it is now, the conquest of the South. Reunification on Hanoi's terms.

What we have is not a civil war. It is a massive campaign of external aggression from North Vietnam.

The political cells have created an enemy pseudo-government that still pervades in many villages and hamlets. The guerrillas wage war constantly, mostly at night, the cruelest kind of war—terrorism. Civilians are shot, bombed and mutilated as examples to those who might resist or defect, or simply because they are leaders.

A typical example of Viet Cong terror took place shortly before I left Vietnam. During the early morning hours of April 16th, the Viet Cong attacked a hamlet 20 miles north of Saigon. Among the victims were five Revolutionary Development team members, three of them were women. Their hands were tied behind their backs and they were all shot through the head.

During the last nine years, 53 thousand Vietnamese — a
large share of them teachers, policemen, and elected or natural leaders -- have been killed or kidnapped. Translated to the United States, that would be more than 600 thousand people, with emphasis on mayors, councilmen, policemen, teachers, government officials and even journalists who would not submit to blackmail.

At the other end of the war spectrum we have fought in the South during the past year, major elements of eight North Vietnamese Divisions. We have captured thousands of weapons and large stores of ammunition and equipment, which have been transported from North Vietnam.

In summary the Viet Cong is not a legitimate nationalistic movement. It is a movement organized, controlled and supported by the communist government of North Vietnam. The support which it has received in South Vietnam has been obtained by terror, intimidation, and murder of those individuals who opposed it.

Two years ago South Vietnam was on the verge of defeat. The enemy's main force units were attacking with increased intensity from hidden bases and sanctuaries. The Government of Vietnam had arrived at a crossroad. It was a question of honoring a long-standing commitment by the United States to a young nation fighting for its freedom, or defaulting to the aggressor. Our President reaffirmed our commitment and made the courageous decision to stand firm -- to stay the course. This meant using whatever
military and economic power was necessary.

Once we had major forces ashore we began to look for the enemy, and he was not hard to find. Major battles ensued. They were bitter and bloody, but in them we learned to make the most of our military assets. We also learned that the enemy has little regard for human life. And for propaganda purposes will turn losses and defeat into obsurred claims of victory.

During the last year and a half we have sought out the enemy, caught him off guard, fought him before he was ready. For a time he stood and fought and we punished him badly. Now he is becoming more difficult to find. We have invaded his elaborate and widely scattered base areas - - some of them built over a period of 20 years.

Working closely with the Vietnamese forces we have moved into many of the populated and productive areas which formerly provided supplies and recruits to the enemy. And we have stayed there.

We have turned the enemy's ambushes against him and we have learned how to draw him into an ambush. We have sent out deep patrols to find him. He has been punished by B-52 strikes and unparalleled close support from our tactical air, artillery and naval gunfire. On land and sea we have made his infiltration costly.

Although the military picture is favorable, I emphasize the fact that we have no evidence to indicate that the enemy is slowing his invasion from the north, or that he is breaking up his major units and scattering them about, or that he has given up his plans
to try to inflict major defeat upon us. He is taking casualties and he does have logistics problems, but his leadership is good and his men are tough and tenacious. He needs a victory for political, psychological and morale purposes, and he will continue to strive for one.

So the end is not in sight. The enemy can hide in the jungles and mountains in South Vietnam where we cannot reach him without major effort. He rests and regroups, trains and replenishes in hidden camps and supply areas in regions along the borders of neutral countries and the Demilitarized Zone, which he overly violated almost a year ago. He continues to recruit and train guerrillas for use as guides and intelligence agents for his main force units, and for sabotage and terror. So we must be prepared for bitter fighting in the days to come.

Before leaving the military situation, I must honestly say that I am concerned about cease-fire proposals. In other wars, a cease-fire was an acceptable condition. But in this war inevitably it will be a military advantage to the enemy and a detriment to our side. This is because of the clandestine character and covert methods of the enemy. Traditionally he has used covertly cease-fire periods to reinforce and resupply his units and to strengthen and realign his political factions.

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One of the regrettable facts of war — any war — is that casualties are not confined to the military forces involved. There are civilian casualties in Vietnam and these are of constant concern to me, my commanders and men. But, civilian casualties do not result from indiscriminate use of our firepower. They are caused by mechanical failure or human error. This is in sharp contrast to the Viet Cong policy of calculated attack on civilians.

Never in the history of warfare have so many precautions been taken by men in combat. We cover an enemy-held area with leaflets and loudspeaker broadcasts warning of impending attack. We do not permit an air strike or artillery fire on a moving column of enemy until Vietnamese officials give approval. Every possible precaution is taken to avoid casualties among civilians. Never has a nation employed its military power with such restraint.

Now a word about the Vietnamese Armed Forces.

I have worked with the Vietnamese military for more than three years, and I have learned to understand and admire them. A look at their record in combat as well as in political administration reveals an exceptional performance, when all is considered. During the last three years I have seen them literacy hold the country together. Despite their military background, they have taken long strides toward developing democratic processes and institutions. They fought the enemy and guerrilla main forces alone, until we arrived. During that time they were expanding their forces to the limit that their manpower and economy could support.

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Except for the Continental Army of our earlier years, never in history has a young military force been subjected to such a challenge. In my book the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces have conducted themselves with credit.

As I tour the country, several times each week, I am encouraged with the obvious improvement in morale, proficiency and quality of their fighting forces.

Today the Republic of Vietnam forces are working and fighting side-by-side with their allies — the Koreans, the Australians, the New Zealanders, the Thais and the Filipinos as well as the Americans — and they earned the confidence of these staunch allies.

The Vietnamese Armed Forces and the Vietnamese people are aware of and appreciate our support. We know and they know that we have assisted them for 12 years in the development of their military organization.

More important to the Vietnamese, I think, is the fact that our American Servicemen are eager to help them. To build such things as schools and dispensaries and other things of lasting value to their community. These civic actions voluntarily undertaken by our troops and those of our allies are inspiring to behold. A young corporal undertakes the support of a Montegnard family whose bread winner has been assassinated; An American squad or platoon adopts a hamlet, bringing to its people the material things they need and a spiritual uplift which will help them to self-sufficiency. Many communities in Vietnam are
living a better life because of the encouragement and help our American troops have given to them. A true missionary zeal among our troops is commonplace, and is one of the unique characteristics of this war.

I am constantly impressed by the concern for the lives of others shown by the men of my command. As I travel among them I see their courage against the enemy and their compassion toward their friends and I am inspired by their example.

I would like to tell you more about the men of my command. Today your Soldiers, Sailors, Airman, Marines and Coast Guardsmen:

Are better educated than before.
Are better informed.
Have traditional American ingenuity and initiative.
Are in better physical condition.
Have high morale.
And understand what the war is all about.
They know they are helping to stop the spread of communism in Southeast Asia and to give the people of South Vietnam a freedom of choice.

They have been given a job, and they are doing it well and with pride. But they are discouraged and so am I about recent unpatriotic acts here at home.

Who are these men about whom I speak with such pride? They are mostly youngsters representing every state in the union—from the farms, the cities, the factories and the campuses.

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They are the sound product of America's democratic society. They are the sum of our educational system, our medical science and our communications. Their excellent morale results from knowledge of their job, and sound military policies; from professional unit leadership and unprecedented material support. Their medical care is superb, their food is excellent and their mail is carefully handled. Shortages have been few and of short duration.

As an individual, this fighting man is a tough determined professional in battle one day, and a sensitive, compassionate helping friend of the Vietnamese people the next. He has seen at first hand communist aggression and subversion at work, he has acquired a deeper appreciation of the importance of freedom. From his ranks in the years ahead will come the confident, alert, intelligent citizens and leaders who will make this nation's future greater than its past.

With fighting forces like these, a commander cannot help but look forward with confidence as he views the military situation.

But I am mindful that the military war in South Vietnam is, from the enemy's point of view, only part of a protracted and carefully coordinated attack, waged in the international arena. Regrettably, I see signs of enemy success in that world arena which he cannot match on the battlefield. He does not understand that American Democracy is founded on debate and he sees every protest as evidence of crumbling morale and diminishing results.
Thus, discouraged by repeated military defeats, but encouraged by what he believes to be popular opposition to our effort in Vietnam, he is determined to continue his aggression from the North. This, inevitably, will cost lives — American, Vietnamese, and those of our other brave allies.

I foresee, in the next few months, some of the bitterest fighting of the war.

But I have confidence in our battlefield capability. And I am confident of the support we and our allies will continue to receive from our President and from the Congress. The magnificent men and women I command in Vietnam have earned the unified support of the American people.

Thank You.
General Westmoreland, have you asked the Pentagon for more troops, and how many?

A. As commander of our forces in Vietnam needless to say I am constantly studying our troop requirements. I continuously analyze the enemy situation. I submit my requests from time-to-time, my desires and my estimates, to my senior military headquarters. I have been getting troops in considerable numbers during the past year; they are continuing to arrive. The number of troops that will be ultimately needed is a matter that will have to be studied in consideration of many factors — our estimate of the enemy's capabilities and intentions, the economy of South Vietnam. Because as we deploy troops to those shores, we put pressure on their economy and this is a factor that has to be considered. These matters and these factors will have to be reviewed at senior levels in Washington. Needless to say the discussions that have taken place are privileged, and, as a matter of military security, I can not give you any definitive numbers as to my estimate of the number of troops that will be required.
4. Would you comment on the bombing today in North Vietnam on an airfield there? What happens if the MIGs take sanctuary in Red China?

A. I was delighted to learn that the MIG airfields had been bombed at least two of them today. These were military targets on which were based aircraft which had been used offensively against our fighter-bombers. It is true that MIGs could take sanctuary in China as they did during the Korean War. But the MIGs would be at a disadvantage operating from those bases compared with those in North Vietnam. Their reaction time would be increased and they would therefore become a lesser threat to our fighter-bombers. The jeopardy to our very fine Air Force and Navy pilots would be reduced.

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4. There are daily statistics of the number of VC killed but serious doubt the body count announced of those that have been killed. What is your view please, about the accuracy of this count?

A. Over a period of over three years I have given this matter considerable personal attention. It is my judgement that the casualty figures that we estimate or state that we have inflicted on the enemy is accurate, perhaps conservative. True enough there could be from time-to-time some exaggeration. There could be some double count. But in my opinion this is more than off-set
that we do not know about. Also we do not claim credit in
estimated and assessing as casualties on the enemy those
that die of wounds. So all factors considered I feel that
the figures that you receive, that are announced by my Headquarters
in Saigon, are definitely accurate and I believe on the
conservative side when all factors are considered.

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9. Could you run this war without political help? Could you
win this war if given a free hand in military decisions?
A. As a military man this is a bit of an awkward question. I
think it impossible in view of the nature of the war -- a war of
both subversion and invasion, a war in which political and
psychological factors are of such consequence -- to sort out the
war between the political and the military. Political factors:
must be considered. They must be considered in selecting
targets. They must be considered in our actions involving
nearly so-called neutral countries. They must be considered
in determining the means to be used in pursuing the war. The
reason for this is not only because of the complexity but also
because of our national policy to confine this war to that of

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a limited war, and this means that means from time-to-time are limited. And that policy has been made loud and clear. It is not our intention to extend the war. We want to keep it as a limited war; therefore, political factors have to be considered, and the decisions involved are necessarily above my level.

Since I deal in military factors I am responsible only for fighting the ground war in South Vietnam and only that air war in the so-called extended battle area.

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Q. What is the possibility of the escalation of the war bringing in Red China and Soviet Russia? How effective would they be if they did come in?

A. This is a very difficult question to speculate on. From the military point of view, I think we should be prepared for any contingency. Of course the USSR is providing equipment for North Vietnam, primarily in terms of air defense weapons and systems. The Communist Chinese are providing support in the form of transportation units, and some AAA weapons, but primarily infantry-type weapons to support the North Vietnamese Army and VC main force units.

I think this boils down to whether the USSR and Red China feel a threat to their form of government and their territory is of such consequence that they could hazard the risk that would necessarily be involved.
Q. Are you being provided ample supplies, ammunition and manpower to win the war, or are you expected to fight only a holding action? Do you see any possibility that Hanoi can be brought to the conference table short of all out military effort?

A. As we built up American force in Vietnam, which started approximately two years ago, we had no logistics base. So while we were moving to the shores of South Vietnam our combat troops, we had to develop concurrently ports, jet airfields, ammunition and supply dumps. For approximately a year we were fighting definitely a holding action. I had to maneuver troops all over the country by battalions to hold our own and not give the enemy the benefit of a victory. During that period we were operating on a logistic shee-string. We had dozens, as a matter of fact in some cases 50 to 100, seagoing ships backed-up because we did not have the deep-water piers and we did not have the lighters to unload them nor the depots in which to deposit the supplies. So what we had, in effect, were a group of floating warehouses. In other words, the ships themselves became warehouses. And we unloaded ships in a discriminating way in order to bring ashore those supplies that we needed. During that period of time we did have some shortages, but they were of short duration and I am happy to say that in no case did they adversely affect our combat operations. The work that has been performed by our logisticians has been magnificent and I believe almost unprecedented in military history. Now that all of that is behind us, we now have a solid logistics base — one that is designed to support our combat troops anywhere in South Vietnam on a sustained combat basis.
And about six months ago we were able to go on the offensive whereupon the enemy has had to in most cases react to our actions, rather than our responding to his. Now I do not see any end to the war in sight. It's going to be a question of putting maximum pressure on the enemy -- anywhere and everywhere that we can. We'll have to grind him down. In effect we're fighting a war of attrition, and, the only alternative is a war of annihilation, which I think we ruled out as a matter of policy. Now we are in a better position to fight a war of attrition than the enemy. But we must have that resolve that I mentioned in my speech. And when the leadership in Hanoi appreciate that we do have that resolve, that we have committed ourselves and will stay with it as long as necessary, and when the leadership in Hanoi realize that the Republic of Vietnam is getting stronger politically, economically, and militarily, and that North Vietnam is being drained of its vitality, by our bombing, by the cost of waging a massive war in the south, then and only then will the leadership sit back and reassess their strategy.

Q. The VC are generally regarded to have fought well against rough odds for some time. To what do you attribute their spirit?

A. The VC, organized, directed and commanded from Hanoi, have placed great emphasis on political indoctrination. As a matter of interest, their training program for their units devotes more time to political indoctrination than it does to military training. The indoctrination is well done, and shows it. And of course it is backed up by a ruthless cadre that use strong arm methods that are required to keep their troops in line. Their so-called cadre or leadership are effective. They have
been well trained and indoctrinated, and they are committed; however, we have noted a number of recent trends that are encouraging. We are picking up more prisoners, and there are more defectors coming in. The rate seems to be increasing in a very encouraging way. We learned that many of the rank and file of the units would like very much to defect, to come in under the Government of Vietnam's amnesty program, the so-called Chieu Hoi program, but the cadre control them so tightly that they can't get away. We also know that there is considerable friction between the NVN leadership and the SVN, the Viet Cong. NVN leaders are playing more and more of a role in the south. The leadership in Hanoi is, by their actions, putting in their own leadership, apparently because they do not trust some of the SVN leadership. There is definitely friction between these two regional groups. The number of defectors that we have received has been multiplied by a factor of two for the last several months and hopefully this trend will continue. The number of senior defectors that are coming in is encouraging. Whereas a year ago our defectors were primarily confined to the lower ranks; now we are getting some senior officers. I talked to one the other day, he was a senior major. He told me that many members of this large headquarters that he served in before defecting, would like very much to defect, but they have not been able to find a way. They are controlled by the NVN leaders with such constance that they could not make the break.
The Americans have taken over a greater part of the war burden. The South Vietnamese seem to be doing less. Is there a danger of making this an all-American war, with the Americans on one side and the Asians on the other?

A. I think that there is little danger or likelihood that will happen.

The South Vietnamese have been fighting their communist enemy for many years, and they will continue to fight. As I said in my prepared remarks, they are fighting now better than ever. I am encouraged by the improved military proficiency -- their morale -- that I see every day. Whereas a year ago there were only about 30 of their 154 battalions considered combat ready, now I consider all but about six as combat effective. Their leadership is improving and this has been their major problem.

Now it is quite understandable why the American people get a distorted idea as to the role of the Vietnamese armed forces. After all, the people in the United States want to read and hear about their troops, and although our press corps in Saigon are very alert to move to the scene of ARVN victory, and we have had quite a number recently, American people are more interested in actions involving their troops than those of the Vietnamese or the Koreans or even the Australians.

Statistically, the Vietnamese Armed Forces are running more
operations than we are. They are taking more casualties. The percentage of enemy they kill compared to their losses compares very favorably to ours. They do lose more weapons. These are lost primarily by the Regional and Popular Forces, the paramilitary forces that frequently man isolated outposts. Outposts that can be overrun by the enemy if he chooses to mass enough force against these outposts and attack with surprise. These do not have the communications that we have; they do not have the fire support. Two weeks ago I was visiting an Army division commander who I have tremendous admiration for — one of the best in the country — and he made the unsolicited remark to me that a year ago our Regional Forces and Popular Forces were no match for Viet Cong main force units. But he says now they are many, many cases where they are defeating Viet Cong main force regular units. A year ago this was unheard of. Now I am not suggesting that all battles between the enemy and the Vietnamese forces, regular or para-military, are victories for the Vietnamese. But they are doing much, much better than they were doing a year ago. I predict that they will continue to improve in the months ahead. After all, the Vietnamese armed forces have carried a tremendous burden. They have held the country together, as I have pointed out. They had a thin veneer of leadership to begin with, which is understandable under the circumstances, but they have had to extend this to man new units. During the last three years I have seen them expand by over 50%, which required...
new division commanders, regimental commanders and battalion commanders. They were having to fight this war alone until we arrived. Now that we are here, we can carry a major burden of the burden against the North Vietnamese Army regulars and against the Viet Cong main force units that are organized up to division strength (two Viet Cong main force regular divisions), and permitted them to devote more of their strength to fighting guerrillas, to protecting people in productive areas where the guerrillas roam. The fighting of guerrillas involves breaking down into small units (squads and platoons) and fighting at night primarily. And they are killing a lot of guerrillas. But these are not spectacular battles. Because we—the Americans, the Australians and the Koreans—are encountering more of the North Vietnamese Army regular units, our battles are more spectacular and are more obvious to the people of this county who read the newspapers, listen to the radio and hear the T.V. But the Vietnamese are still very much in there, and I am very much encouraged by the progress that is being made.

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Q. Is it true that you may be coming home one of these days and that you have political ambitions when you do?

A. I am a soldier and I think I have a fairly important job in South Vietnam today. And as such I have no political intention, ambitions or aspirations. I will remain at my post as long as my superior authorities wish me to do so.

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