

*Guide to the Microfilm Edition of*

A Study of Strategic  
Lessons Learned  
in Vietnam  
1945–1975

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**A** *Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, 1945–1975* was originally requested by the U.S. Army War College as part of a series of studies on the Vietnam War. It was prepared by the BDM Corporation, which was given the task “to identify and analyze lessons that should be learned from two decades of direct U.S. involvement in the affairs of South Vietnam.” Although the study accounted for the participation of other armed services and factors such as the domestic front during the war, it focuses primarily on specific military and strategic lessons learned by the U.S. Army. These lessons encompass aspects of military training, morale, and organization as well as specific tactical lessons taken from the battlefield; furthermore, some volumes discuss the history of the conflict after the liberation of French Indochina from the Japanese in 1945.

The framework for this Army study on Vietnam was expressed by Major General DeWitt C. Smith, Jr., at the inaugural meeting of the Army’s Study Advisory Group (SAG):

Basically, as far as Vietnam is concerned, we won practically all the battles but, by any sensible definition of strategic objectives, we lost the war. This is a new experience — harrowing, sorrowful, but true. Thus it’s absolutely imperative that we study how it is that you can win so frequently, and so well, in a war-fighting sense, and yet lose a war in a strategic or political sense. It’s unique, and it’s not something we want to duplicate!

General Smith’s statement highlighted the confusion felt by Army leadership over the results of the U.S. defeat in Vietnam. The authors of the study examine the stark contrasts in perceptions among the belligerents, and how measurements of the degrees of “winning” and “losing” became blurred in the complexities of political armed conflict against a determined foe. Other definitions and long-held tenets of conventional warfare, including what constitutes a “battle,” were seriously questioned in the study (e.g., could the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon be considered a “battle”? What of the drain on U.S. armed forces morale and manpower caused by nonconventional methods of warfare such as terror bombing, booby traps, and random rocket and mortar raids?). In the end the authors questioned the “American way of war” and

concluded that a proper study of the lessons of the Vietnam War had to abandon established methods of military analysis to provide an accurate account. On the other hand, the authors write that some ancient maxims of warfare, such as “know your enemy,” were not heeded by the United States, and need to be followed more closely in the future.

*A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam* is divided into nine sections, described in the following section of this guide. Volume 1, *The Enemy*, describes the factors that influenced the Communist Vietnamese during the war; volume 2, *South Vietnam*, lists the key elements that shaped South Vietnam’s response to the Communist threat; volumes 3 and 4, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Vietnam, 1945–1975* and *U.S. Domestic Factors Influencing Vietnam War Policy Making*, list important international and domestic factors that influenced U.S. decision and decision makers; volumes 5 and 6, *Planning the War and Conduct of the War*, examine the lessons learned from military operations; volume 7, *The Soldier*, describes training, morale, organization, and conduct of the U.S. soldier in Vietnam, including problems of racism and drug abuse; volume 8, *Results of the War*, attempts to sort through what was gained and lost by each side at the war’s end in 1975. The ninth section of the study, *Omnibus Executive Summary*, incorporates the conclusions of the previous eight volumes into one short report.

Each volume has a detailed table of contents, list of figures and maps, and a timeline of significant events referred to in the text. For this reason, researchers are provided with only volume breaks and brief descriptions of each study in the roll contents portion of this guide. For a complete list of topics and organizations covered in the study, the researcher should refer to the table of contents at the beginning of each volume.

The study was originally intended to be used by the Army for instructional purposes. Shortly after it was first made available, the Army War College Security Office notified all recipients in December 1980 that the study contained classified information and should be secured. The BDM Corporation subsequently revised those pages that contained sensitive information and reissued the study in the form reproduced in this microfilm edition.

*Terry Lynch*  
*Microfilm Editor*

<i>Roll No.</i>	<i>Frame No.</i>	<i>Contents</i>
1	0004	<b>Volume 1</b> <i>The Enemy</i>

The chapters of this volume provide several key insights concerning the Communist Vietnamese from 1945 to 1975. These insights relate to decisions and events from which lessons can be derived regarding the Vietnam War. They are specifically focused on the people, places, and historical events associated with Southeast Asia in general and, in this volume, particularly with the Communist Vietnamese.

The lessons from Vietnam are not new to warfare. In the main, they are lessons from earlier conflicts that were forgotten, misunderstood, or misapplied. Not surprisingly, however, a few lessons were applied properly. Because lessons are general in nature they usually appear to be platitudes. So, too, do the principles of war or the observations of von Clausewitz, or Napoleon, or Sun Tzu.

This volume examines the following topics:

- the long-range goals of the Communist Vietnamese, 1945–1975;
- the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) leaders and the factors that influenced their character and will to continue their struggle for two decades;
- the civil and military organizations in North Vietnam, the Communist structure in the South, and the relationships between Vietnamese Communist organizations;
- the Communist Vietnamese mobilization of their meager resources to challenge the South Vietnamese government and the United States;
- the system of bases, sanctuaries, and lines of communication established to support war activities;
- the nature and extent of outside support the Communist Vietnamese received from their major allies; and
- the major domestic and international constraints on DRV policies and courses of action, and the DRV's reaction to those constraints.

<i>Roll No.</i>	<i>Frame No.</i>	<i>Contents</i>
1	0334	<b>Volume 2</b> <i>South Vietnam</i>

This volume is concerned with the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), focusing primarily on the society, the government, and its armed forces.

The Second Indochina War (1961–1975) was fought to determine who would have the ultimate physical and political control of the southern half of Vietnam. Despite tactical shifts to meet changing circumstances, the leaders of the Lao Dong party never wavered from their primary goal of unifying Vietnam under their control. The precariously unified RVN fought for its existence as a non-Communist entity. While this same end was desirable and important to the United States, it was so only as a means toward larger but changing strategic goals; for example, containment of communism, defeat of “Wars of National Liberation,” preservation of U.S. prestige and credibility, and, finally, withdrawal of U.S. forces “with honor.”

From birth until death the RVN was beset with major weaknesses—societal, political, economic, and military—and was extremely dependent on U.S. support for its survival. During its twenty-odd years of existence the RVN experienced two relatively stable and encouraging periods: 1956 to 1960 and 1969 to 1972. But on balance, without massive U.S. support, the RVN was never a match for its more cohesive, better-organized, and well-supported opponents. Given the goal and determination of its enemies and the increasingly unfavorable balance of forces after the 1973 cease-fire, it was only a matter of time and circumstance before the RVN fell. Some South Vietnamese leaders said, in retrospect, that “fate” was not on their side. It was not, nor was much else of significance in 1975.

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1	0721	<b>Volume 3</b> <i>U.S. Foreign Policy and Vietnam, 1945–1975</i>

Chapter 1, entitled “U.S. Global Policy and Its Relationship to

U.S. Policy for Southeast Asia, 1945–1975,” demonstrates that America’s interests in Southeast Asia were almost entirely dictated by its perceptions of global threats outside the region, particularly the threat of Soviet and Chinese Communist expansionism. The major themes assessed in this chapter include:

- the conflict of colonialist concerns with postwar economic reconstruction and the creation of security alliances;
- the conflict between anticolonialist and anti-Communist concerns;
- the U.S. understanding of monolithic communism and the Sino-Soviet rift;
- the U.S. investment with its allies, particularly with South Vietnam (in men, material, money, and prestige), and its effect on U.S. foreign policy formation; and
- the United States’ eventual exploitation of hostilities between the Soviet Union and Communist China as a politico-diplomatic tool.

Chapter 2, entitled “Historical Precedents Which Influenced U.S. Involvement in Vietnam,” identifies those historical experiences most influential in shaping U.S. policy for Vietnam. The major themes emerging from this chapter include:

- the fear of appeasement, such as occurred at Munich in 1938, served to justify the U.S. policy of containment in Southeast Asia;
- the “loss of China” prompted successive U.S. administrations to fear a “loss” in Southeast Asia, and to commit U.S. resources in order to prevent such a “loss”;
- the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion served to strengthen the Kennedy administration’s resolve in proving U.S. capabilities (especially counterinsurgency) elsewhere, particularly in Vietnam;
- the fear of Chinese Communist intervention, such as experienced during the Korean War, limited the level of the U.S. military response to North Vietnam; and
- the adage “never again,” referring to U.S. involvement in another Asian land war, served to constrain two post-World War II administrations in policymaking for Vietnam.

Chapter 3, entitled “Washington and Vietnam: U.S. National-Level Policy Makers and the Policy-Making Process,” explains the pervasiveness of the containment doctrine and domino theory in U.S. policy toward Vietnam by showing that the key decision makers shared a belief in their validity in Indochina. This chapter

shows that the decision-making processes, while enabling some dissent on this view to emerge, tended to minimize dissent by stressing presidential decision making with a small group of loyal appointed advisers who shared the basic beliefs of the president. It also explores the themes of centralization and decentralization in the decision-making process.

The chapters of Volume 3 develop a number of key insights and lessons relating to the formulation of U.S. policy toward Vietnam from 1945 to 1975. These insights underscore both the general context and the specific nature of this policymaking—the global environment in which Vietnam policy was formulated, the historical precedents that influenced subsequent U.S. and Southeast Asian foreign policies, and the policymaking process itself. The insights are specific, focusing on such issues as U.S. perceptions of its global role and its external powers (both friendly and unfriendly), consistencies and contradictions in U.S. foreign policies, the influence of historical precedents on U.S. policymakers, and the advantages and liabilities inherent in specific approaches to policymaking. In contrast, the lessons derived in this volume are general, concentrating on the broader issues and themes discussed in the volume relevant to U.S. foreign policy during the 1945–1975 period and to present-day policies.

<i>Roll No.</i>	<i>Frame No.</i>	<i>Contents</i>
1	1063	<b>Volume 4</b> <i>U.S. Domestic Factors Influencing Vietnam War Policy Making</i>

This study examines the broad nature of support for the war and the changes within U.S. society that existed among important subgroups of American society. This effort is designed to provide a base for later consideration of the impact that various subgroups had on the policymaking process. The impact of the subgroups upon policymaking may be more indirect than direct and hence less immediately obvious. Particular emphasis is devoted to the leaders of these subgroups where they can be identified. The study also examines the impact of the media both directly (through the influence of political figures) and indirectly (by examination of the impact that media presentation of the news had upon the public). Economic



factors that influenced the war and the role of the war in shaping the U.S. economy are also analyzed. A consideration of the impact of factors on the political system and the response of the political system are the keys to understanding the importance of domestic factors in the formulation of government policies. The study concludes with an examination of the impact that the changing political mood of Congress and the nation had upon the executive branch's authority to conduct foreign policy.

The Vietnam War demonstrated the important role played by domestic factors in foreign policy. Social change, the economy, the media, and the political scene influenced U.S. involvement in the war. Nevertheless, domestic politics dictated the course of this involvement. Although presidential politics determined the direction of U.S. involvement during the 1960s, Congress during the 1970s reasserted its constitutional function to advise and consent on foreign policy matters, specifically war-related issues.

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2	0001	<b>Volume 5</b> <i>Planning the War</i>

Volume 5 is a collection of eight tasks, as described below:

- *Objectives and Strategies* — a comparison of U.S. and allied objectives and strategies and those of North Vietnam and its two principal supporters, the USSR and the People's Republic of China (PRC).

- *U.S. Foreign Policy* — an examination of the effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy in providing support for U.S. objectives in Vietnam.

- *Contingency Planning* — a description of the scope and general content of U.S. contingency planning for Southeast Asia in the period preceding large-scale U.S. involvement and of the ways the actual commitment differed from the assumed or projected conditions.

- *Mobilization* — a determination of the extent to which mobilization of National Guard and Reserve Forces was considered. The decision not to mobilize until the *Pueblo* crisis will be assessed as well as its subsequent impact on the war, the U.S. armed forces, and U.S. society.

- *Pacification and Vietnamization* — a description and analysis of the evolution of the pacification and Vietnamization programs, their impact on the war effort, and degree of success.

- *U.S. Withdrawal* — a description of the primary influences that led to the U.S. withdrawal and the consequences of that withdrawal on the war, on U.S. international relations, and on Asian power relationships.

- *Negotiations* — a description of the extent to which the negotiating process assisted or detracted from attainment of U.S. goals; the strengths and weaknesses exploited by each side in the negotiating process; the different approaches to negotiation taken by the Americans, North Vietnamese, Government of Vietnam (GVN), and Viet Cong (VC) Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG); and recommendations of how the United States should approach or conduct such negotiations in the future.

- *Follow-on Effort* — a description of the postwithdrawal U.S. commitment to aid South Vietnam and the degree to which it was carried out, including physical and psychological results.

The chapters in Volume 5 develop a number of key insights and lessons relating to the planning of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict. In addition to identifying the roots and origins of U.S. planning and policy initiatives for Vietnam, this volume describes and assesses the efficacy of U.S. contingency planning, the U.S. foreign policy objectives and strategies for Vietnam, national mobilization policy during this critical period, the planning and implementation of pacification and Vietnamization programs, the planning and implementation of U.S. combat force withdrawals, the objectives and strategies of U.S. negotiations to end hostilities, and the impact of the U.S. follow-on effort in support of South Vietnam.

The insights are specific and focus on such issues as the need for clarity and consistency in National Command Authority directives. These directives state policy objectives and strategies. They stress the need for a mechanism whereby U.S. foreign policy can be thoroughly reassessed periodically as well as the need for U.S. leaders and planners alike to keep plans and policies in line with national desires and direction. The lessons, on the other hand, are general and concentrate on broad issues and themes.

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2	0434	<b>Volume 6</b> <i>Conduct of the War</i> <i>Book 1: Operational Analyses</i>

In Book 1, *Operational Analyses* of Volume 6, *Conduct of the War*, the course of the ground war is covered in the first five chapters:

1) U.S. Aid and Advice (1950–1960), often based on faulty perceptions of threat and the natural tendency to create an ally in our own image;

2) The Counterinsurgency Era (1960–1964), which resulted from the failure of earlier advice and support and the endemic political instability in South Vietnam;

3) America Takes Charge (1965–1968), when the United States developed the best combat forces it had ever put in the field at the outset of a war, and a period when the massive U.S. presence stabilized the military situation in the Republic of Vietnam but deprived both the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) and the GVN from learning how to stand on their own; and when U.S. and international public support for the war declined steadily;

4) U.S. Phases Out (1969–1972), when public and congressional attitudes made it necessary for the United States to turn the war over to the RVNAF, and a period during which serious morale and disciplinary problems wracked many U.S. units;

5) RVNAF Stands and Falls—Alone (1973–1975), when U.S. presidential promises for aid and support failed to materialize and the RVNAF proved unable to stand against the expanded and modernized People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) operating from a superior geostrategic position.

Air, naval, and unconventional operations are analyzed in the closing three chapters, and in each case the data and analyses cover the entire war.

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3	0001	<b>Volume 6</b> <i>Conduct of the War</i> <i>Book 2: Functional Analyses</i>

Book 2 of Volume 6, *Conduct of the War* covers the functional or specialist aspects of that war, such as intelligence, logistics and the serious command and control problems that impacted on the conduct of the war. Other subtopics include functional areas such as the role of advisers, psychological operations, civil affairs, measures of progress, technology, and allied participation and support.

Although much of this data was peculiar to Vietnam, a few important lessons can be identified, particularly in the fields of intelligence, logistics, and military assistance and advisory activities.

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3	0555	<b>Volume 7</b> <i>The Soldier</i>

This volume describes how U.S. strategy in Vietnam was affected by the character of the American soldier and the characteristics of the American military and attempts to determine whether the average American soldier changed during the period from 1960 to 1973. It examines the socioeconomic background of the soldier and the personnel policies at the national level that impacted on the conduct of the war, most notably the selective service system, the presidential refusal to mobilize the Reserve Component, and Project 100,000.

Training and indoctrination, although generally good, were unable in themselves to resolve the serious "people problems" that haunted the military during the four years of gradual U.S. withdrawal from the Republic of Vietnam. Service personnel policies that impacted on training are also evaluated.

Very real leadership and ethics problems surfaced during the Vietnam War and had an impact on troop morale and discipline, although other factors beyond military control also had strong influences. This volume shows, however, that the services were far too slow in recognizing and adjusting to these outside influences.

Racial tensions surfaced in the ranks of U.S. forces in Vietnam and elsewhere from 1960 to 1973. Their comparatively minor impact on combat operations is discussed, as is the impact on noncombat functions. These tensions derived from real and perceived inequities in treatment accorded racial minorities in Vietnam, the United States, and elsewhere.

Drug abuse, including alcohol abuse, which was the more widespread and serious problem, is examined using various research data accumulated by social scientists, congressional investigations, and the U.S. armed forces.

This volume also examines the impact of war on the soldiers' mental health, drawing comparisons between psychological problems that surfaced in past conflicts with those encountered by U.S. soldiers during the Vietnam War.

The chapters of *The Soldier* develop key insights and lessons concerning the U.S. soldier during the years from 1960 to 1973. The insights highlight soldier-related problems and policies that developed during the years of the U.S. combat role in Indochina, specifically personnel policies and problems, racial discrimination, drug abuse, leadership quality, and careerism. The accompanying lessons, while derived from U.S. soldiers' experiences in Vietnam, are more general and of greater interest to U.S. military leaders and planners.

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3	0938	<b>Volume 8</b> <i>Results of the War</i>

This volume, *Results of the War*, assesses the results of the war for the United States in terms of its society and government, the image and credibility of the nation, its foreign policy and military posture, the regional and world balance of power, and its alliances and commitments. Although it is intimately related to this study's previous volumes and to the lessons drawn therein, it is also unique, owing to the particular focus of the volume: The results of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, in themselves, may be regarded as lessons that have as their derivation this entire study effort.

Essay 1 focuses on lessons from history, particularly as they relate to Vietnam, discussing both the utility and limitations of

drawing lessons and, more problematically, of applying them to future events. Essay 2 concentrates on the evolving international order and the role that Vietnam had in shaping both this order and the U.S. role in it. Essay 3 assesses the results of the war for the U.S. home front, focusing on the effects of Vietnam for the American public, its perceptions of the U.S. government's role in both domestic and international politics, and changes in national-level decision making that developed as a result of Vietnam. Essay 4 offers a general and thematic discussion of Vietnam's implications for the U.S. military and, particularly, for the U.S. Army. Topics addressed include the All-Volunteer Army, military perceptions of limited war and the strategy of attrition, and the impact of Vietnam on military training for future threats and crises. Finally, Essay 5 provides an overview of changes in Southeast Asia which have occurred since the final defeat in 1975, and which were, in part, shaped by the Vietnam War.

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3	1038	<b>Volume 9</b> <i>Omnibus Executive Summary</i>

This omnibus portion of the executive summary focuses on several of the most significant themes emerging from the study that are likely to concern leaders and strategists. The executive summaries for the eight volumes of the study are included.



