

Politics of the Vietnam War
Georgia Institute of Technology
Spring Semester 2007

INTA 4101A, CR# 27955
MWF 12:05 – 12:55 p.m.
Skyles Bldg. 268

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Course Objectives

This course is organized around the strategic problem of how a weaker state defeats a stronger state in war. The conflict between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, or North Vietnam) and the United States of America between 1964 and 1975 will be used as a case study of this strategic problem.

The course will begin by analyzing Mao Zedong's and Vo Nguyen Giap's ideas about how the weak may defeat the strong, and Karl von Clausewitz's ideas about the nature of war. The course will then proceed more-or-less chronologically through the history of the Vietnam wars from circa 1940 to 1975, not assuming students are already familiar with that history, but familiarizing them with it as we go. This more-or-less chronological study of the history of the Vietnam war will be structured, however, by several theoretical schools of interpretation about why the US lost and North Vietnam won the war. These schools of interpretation are:

Unjust War: According to this school of interpretation, the US lost because its cause was steeped in ignorance, arrogance, and fundamentally unjust. The US stepped into the shoes of White, European, colonial power France just as epic national awakenings were sweeping post W.W. II Asia and the Vietnamese people were rising to liberate their nation after long foreign domination. Communism became melded with nationalism in Vietnam. The US never fully understood these elemental dynamics --- or the Vietnamese people's impressive and long history of tenacious resistance to foreign invaders. Hanoi ultimately prevailed because it represented Vietnamese nationalism while Washington was seen as yet another foreign invader.

Faulty Strategies: According to this school of interpretation, the US lost because of a string of strategic blunders. Great force will not prevail against a cunning enemy unless use of that force is guided by sound strategy, and this was not the case with the US conduct of the Vietnam war. US leaders --- civilian and military --- chose ways of waging the war that allowed Hanoi to play to its own strengths and to US weaknesses thereby preventing decisive application of US power to destroy North Vietnam's ability to continue prosecuting the war. The US defeat was fundamentally due to an absence of sound US strategic thought, and the catalogue of US strategic blunders in this regard is long.

Lost Victory: According to this interpretation, the US actually won the war against Hanoi after much stupidity during the Lyndon Johnson – William Westmoreland years. Under the new leadership of Creighton Abrams, William Colby, and Richard Nixon by early 1973 (when the “peace agreement” was signed), the insurgency was destroyed and the South essentially pacified, while Saigon’s armies had proved their ability to hold against North Vietnamese conventional invasion with US support. South Vietnam had a good chance of surviving had US support continued, but that support failed due largely to seizure of power over US foreign policy by Congressional Democrats after the 1972 election. The US walked away from South Vietnam leaving that state without support to collapse before North Vietnam’s armies in 1974-75. This interpretation focuses on US lack of resolve and the “invitation to struggle” inherent in the peculiar US institution of separation of powers.

Each of these schools of interpretation has considerable utility in understanding Hanoi’s defeat of the United States. But each interpretation also has problems as a fully satisfactory explanation of that outcome. We will explore the problems with each school of interpretation.

We will also take seriously North Vietnam as a strategic actor and enemy. Hanoi’s victory and Washington’s defeat was due, in large part, to North Vietnamese cunning, strategic flexibility, and tenacious resolution. Throughout the course we will consider the political, military, and diplomatic strategies employed by Hanoi to exhaust and ultimately defeat the United States. This offers a fourth perspective on why North Vietnam was able to defeat the United States:

Sound Strategy of Peoples War: Grounded in the strategic thought of Mao Zedong as refined by North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap, doctrines of the dialectical and essentially politically nature of warfare, guided Hanoi, allowing it to exploit US weaknesses while maximizing North Vietnam’s own strengths. People’s War can be thought of as a variant of asymmetrical warfare, and the Vietnam war offers an excellent case study of this doctrine and its utility.

Determination of Course Grade:

Course grade will be based on 3 exams worth 25 percent of the final grade, a map quiz early in the course worth 5 percent of the final grade, and attendance representing 20 percent of the final grade.

The first two mid-term exams will be a combination of essay and multiple choice. The final exam will be entirely multiple choice.

Map Quiz: The map quiz is scheduled for the beginning of class on 22 January 2007. I will give you an outline map with different Arabic and Roman numbers and

different upper case and lower case letters indicating different features. You will be expected to know for Southeast Asia: the names of countries; the names of oceans, straits, and seas; the capitals of countries; the names of major rivers. For Vietnam you will be expected to know: the names and locations of major cities; the names and locations of major rivers; the names and locations of major mountain ranges, deltas, etc. geographic features.

Class Policies:

Missed Exams

Missed exams may be made-up only if missed for serious, involuntary reasons, and only if the professor is contacted with an explanation on or before the day of the exam. Lack of preparation is not a reason for not taking a scheduled exam. Special early or late exams will not be given to accommodate student holiday travel schedules. The date of the final exam is carved in stone by the Institute. It cannot be changed or special exam times arranged for the convenience of students.

Attendance Policy

At a philosophical level, taking attendance should be unnecessary in a university class. The students are, in principle, adults and responsible for their own behavior. If they are not interested in course material, it should be up to them to attend or not to attend class lectures. Practically speaking, however, I've noticed over years of teaching a very strong correlation between taking roll in class and class attendance. As a practical matter, a class in which roll is taken routinely achieves attendance on the order of 80%, while a class without roll-call will have attendance on the order of 50 %. Since I believe that attending class lectures substantially facilitates understanding of the themes developed in the course, and since the purpose of a course grade is to measure a student's mastery of a particular body of knowledge and set of analytical skills, I will take roll in class. A sign-up roster will be circulated at the beginning of each class and students should sign it.

Class regulations regarding this attendance roster will be strict, and will be strictly enforced. If you come in late and miss the sign-up, it is entirely your responsibility to sign the roster after class. If you forget to sign up after a particular class, the matter is past. The instructor will not sign-up for you, or allow you to sign after we have left the classroom on a particular day. Nor will the instructor respond to pleas by telephone, email, or in person, that a student was actually in attendance day but forgot to sign the attendance roster, and so on. As your instructor I go to considerable effort to keep track of attendance in a large class such as this. The quid pro quo is that you fulfill your responsibilities.

Absences from class are "excused" (that is, attendance is marked for a particular day even though the student did not in fact attend) only for Institute endorsed athletic events or for ROTC training events. This is an Institute policy and is required of the course

instructor. Athletes and officer candidates falling into this category are required to give the instructor an official Tech document indicating their absences with the student name and the specific class dates to be missed underlined or high-lighted in colored pen. If this is not done, the document will be returned to the student with a request that they read the syllabus.

Absences because of illness, automobile accidents or breakdowns, deaths in the family, or other personal reasons will not be excused. Attendance is taken not as an indicator of the student's sincerity or good intentions, nor as a measure of his/her vulnerability to events beyond their control, but entirely as a rough proxy variable for his/her probable mastery of material presented in the course. In other words, if you miss a class, for whatever reasons, you missed that day's explication of material by the instructor.

Reporting of Final Grades

To protect the privacy of students, final grades will not be publicly posted. Because of the large enrollment of this class, it is impossible for the professor to individually inform students of their final grade --- by email, telephone, or letter. The professor will report all final grades to the Georgia Tech Registrar by the first Monday after the end of Finals Week, as specified by Georgia Tech regulations. Students may then learn their final grade by accessing the Registrar web-site at:

<https://oscar/gatech.edu>

Student Opinion Survey of Course

During the final week or so of the course, students are urged to access the on-line student evaluation of the course and respond to the various questions asked there. The instructor *does* use the results of this survey in honing the course, and his bosses *do* use these results in determining his merit pay raises. The course survey is found at:

<http://www.coursesurvey.gatech.edu>

Required Textbooks:

William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1981.

George Herring, America's Longest War, The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, Third Edition, New York: McGraw Hill, 1996.

Qiang Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Andrew Krepinevice, The Army in Vietnam. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

Truong Nhu Tang, Viet Cong Memoir, New York: Vintage Books, 1985.

Anthony James Joes, The War for South Vietnam, 1954-1975, Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2001.

Required Reserve Readings (All of the following are on electronic reserve with the library):

Mao Zedong, "On Protracted War," from Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Volume II, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967.

Vo Nguyen Giap, "The Political and Military Line of Our Party," The Military Art of People's War, New York: Monthly Review, 1970, p. 163-184.

Harry Summers, On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War, New York: Dell, 1982, "Introduction," p. 21-29.

Keith W. Taylor, The Birth of Vietnam, Introduction, p. xvii-xxi.

Roger H. Hilsman, To Move a Nation, chapter 12, "Kennedy and the Neutralization of Laos," p. 142-155.

H.R. McMaster, Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam, Harper, 1997. Chapter 4, pg. 62-84.

John Garver, "The Chinese Threat in the Vietnam War," Parameters, Spring 1992, p. 73-85.

William Lynch, "American Public Opinion Towards the War," In Robert McMahon, editor, Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War, p. 502-515.

"The Movement Against the War, in Vietnam and America," p. 291-303, in Vietnam and America: A Documented History, Marvin Gettleman, et. al., editors, New York: Grove Press, 1985.

Richard M. Nixon, "How We Lost the Peace," p. 165-211, in No More Vietnams, New York: Avon Books, 1985. Chapter 5.

William Colby, Lost Victory, Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989. Chapters 16 & 17, p. 259-276, 277-290

Lewis Sorley, A Better War, The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam, New York: Harvest, 1999. Chapter 2, "New Tactics," p. 17-30.

ACCESSING LIBRARY ELECTRONIC RESERVES:

The reserve readings listed above are on electronic reserve with the library. To access them go to:

www.library.gatech.edu

Click on "Course Reserves"
Browse to "International Affairs"
Open "INTA 4101, Garver"

To access the electronic reserve materials you will need a Georgia Tech Prism ID and password. If you do not have or have forgotten such, you should be able to create one on-line by going to the "help" menu on the left-hand side of the "library.gatech.edu" web-page. If you have problems with reserves, you may call 404-894-7600 at the library and ask for Stephanie, Kevin, or Felecia. If you need further help creating a password or accessing e-reserves, you may telephone the Library Reference Desk at 4-4530.

Please do not ask the professor to help you find a particular reserve reading. Georgia Tech has substantial staff support for just that purpose.

Outline of Lecture Topics and Reading Assignments:

The Strategy of People's War

8 Jan. The Strategic Problem: How Can the Weak Defeat the Strong?

10 Jan. Mao Zedong on Protracted War

Readings: Mao Zedong, "On Protracted War," from Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Volume II. (e-reserve)

12 Jan. Mao and Vo Nguyen Giap on People's War

Readings: Vo Nguyen Giap, reading from The Military Art of People's War. (e-reserve) Duiker, Communist Road, p. 128-131.

17 Jan. Karl von Clausewitz on success and failure in war

Readings: Harry Summers, On Strategy, A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War, Dell Books, 1982, "Introduction," p. 21-29.

The Unjust War Interpretation

19 Jan. The Vietnamese People and their Struggle for Independence

Readings: Keith W. Taylor, The Birth of Vietnam, Introduction, p. xvii-xxi.

22 Jan. Colonialism and Nationalism in Vietnam

Readings: Duiker, Chapters 1 & 2.

MAP QUIZ: At beginning of class on 22 January.

24 Jan. Communism and Nationalism in Vietnam

Readings, Duiker, Chapters 3 & 4. Truong, Memoir, chapter 1.

MAP QUIZ

26 Jan. Soviet and Chinese Policies

Readings: Qiang Zhai, China, chapters 1 & 2.

29 Jan. The Dilemma of US Policy: Decolonialization, the Soviet Union, and the Chinese Revolution

Readings: Herring, Longest War, chapter 1. Truong, Memoir, chapt 2-4.

31 Jan. VWP Strategy: The United Front and People's War

Readings: Duiker, Communist Road, chapters 5 & 6.

2 Feb. French Defeat, the Geneva Conference, and the Partition of Vietnam

Readings: Duiker, Communist Road, chapters 7 & 8. Qiang Zhai, China, chapter 3.

5 Feb. Nation Building in South Vietnam; non-Communist Vietnamese Nationalism and US Policy

Readings: . Herring, Longest War, chapter 2 & 3. Tang, Memoir, chapters 5-6.

7 Feb. Origins of the Southern Insurgency and Hanoi's Policy

- Readings: Duiker, Communist Road, chapter 8. Tang, Memoir, chapters 7-8.
- 9 Feb. The Sino-Soviet Split and the Kennedy's emphasis on counter-insurgency
- Readings: Krepinevich, Army, chapters 1 & 2. Qiang Zhai, China, chapter 5.
- 12 Feb. The Viet Cong, the DRV, and the North Vietnamese Army
- Readings: Duiker, Communist Road, chapters 9. Krepinevich, Army, chapter 3 & 4.
- 14 Feb. The US decision for war
- Readings: Herring, Longest War, chapter 4.
- 16 Feb. The North Vietnamese decision for war
- Readings: Duiker, Communist Road, chapter 10.
- 19 Feb. **FIRST EXAM**

The Faulty Strategies Interpretation

- 21 Feb. The Strategy of Graduated Escalation
- Readings: Herring, Longest War, chapter 4.
- 23 Feb. Lawyers as Military Strategists
- Reading: MacMaster, Dereliction of Duty, chapter 4. .
- 26 Feb. Limitation and the Conduct of the Air War
- Readings: no reading.
- 28 Feb. Limitation and the Failure to Isolate the Battlefield
- Readings: Hilsman, Move a Nation, chapter 12.
- 2 Mar. Westmoreland and Search and Destroy: Conduct of the Land War
- Readings: Krepinevich, Army, chapters 5-6. .
- NOTE:** 2 March is the last day you can withdraw from a class with a "W".

5 Mar. The Great Society or the War in Vietnam?

Readings: none

7 Mar. The China Threat and the Strategy of Limitation

Readings: Qiang Zhai, China, chapter 7. Truong, Memoir, chapters 11-17.
John Garver, "The Chinese Threat in the Vietnam War," Parameters, Spring 1992, p. 73-85.

9 Mar. Class Discussion: Why Did the US Knowingly Undertake to Fight a Land-war of Attrition in Asia?

Readings: none

The Lost Victory Interpretation

12 Mar. US Public Support for the War; Guest Lecture by HST Professor Doug Flamming.

Readings: William Lynch, "American Public Opinion Towards the War," In Robert McMahon, editor, Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War, p. 505-515.

14 Mar. The Anti-war Movement; Guest Lecture by HTS Professor Doug Flamming.

Readings: "The Movement Against the War, in Vietnam and America, Marvin Gettleman, et. al., editor, p. 291-331.

16 Mar. No Class: Catch up on readings.

26 Mar. Creighton Abram's "One War" Strategy

Readings: Sorley, Chapter 2, "New Tactics," p. 17-30.

28 Mar. The Success of Pacification

Reading: William Colby, Lost Victory, chapters 16 & 17, p. 259-276, 277-290.

30 Mar. **SECOND EXAM**

12 Apr. The [Putative] Success of Vietnamization

Reading: Herring, Longest War, chapter 6.

4 Apr. Nixon's Triangular Diplomacy and Its Effect on Hanoi

Readings: Duiker, Communist Road, chapter 11.

6 Apr. The Easter Offensive and Linebacker I

Readings: Herring, Longest War, chapter 7.

9 Apr. Linebacker II and the 1973 "Peace Agreement"

Reading: none

11 Apr. The 1973 Agreement and the "Decent Interval" Hypothesis

Readings: "How We Lost the Peace," in Richard Nixon, No More Vietnams, chapter 4, p. 165-211.

13 Apr. The 1972 election, Watergate, and Presidential Power

Reading: none

16 Apr. Democratic Congressional Seizure of Control over Indochina Policy

Reading: none

18 Apr. The Deteriorating Situation of the Republic of Vietnam after 1973

Readings: Herring, Longest War, chapter 8.

20 Apr. Hanoi's Final Offensive and the US Reaction

Readings: Duiker, Communist Road, chapter 12.

23 Apr. The aftermath; Falling and Non-Falling Dominos

Readings: Truong, Memoir, chapters 19-24.

25 Apr. Class discussion: Why Hanoi Won and the US Lost the Vietnam War

Readings: Duiker, Communist Road, chapter 13.

27 Apr. The "Lessons" of Vietnam

Final Exam: Friday, 4 May 2007, 8:00-15:50 a.m.