The Hamlet Evaluation System - Reevaluated

*A GIS application to Civil-Military Operations in the Vietnam War*

Author: John T McCormick

**Abstract**

*The Hamlet Evaluation System (including its precursor HAMLA) was an attempt to quantify the pacification campaign in the US-Vietnam War. In a "war without fronts" the need for quantitative metrics to measure success was paramount. Yet much of the historiography suggests that HES and other statistical survey techniques were not fully embraced. Crude efficiency measures such as body count and kill-death ratios are often described as the focus of commanders attempts to measure the war. If this is the case, why were more sophisticated systems such as the HES being ignored? Was the issue one of the data collection itself or a failure to analyze the data in light of the war’s strategic aims? This analysis seeks to answer the above questions by applying modern data analytic and GIS techniques to understand, model, and communicate the data collected in the HES.*

1. **Introduction**

In popular memory, the Vietnam War is the war where everything went wrong. The consistent themes of most American depictions of the war (*Platoon, Apocalypse Now,* and even the parody *Tropic Thunder*) are brutality, senselessness, and a descent into madness. In no small part this cultural account has been reinforced by the vast majority of Vietnam historiography written by both professional military officers and military historians that criticize the conduct of the war at every level. These critiques broadly fall into two camps of revisionist.[[1]](#footnote-1) First, the “conservative counterfactual” revisionist argue that the Army could have won the war if “its hands weren’t tied behind their back."[[2]](#footnote-2) And, second, ”counter-insurgency experts” claim that the War would have been winnable if the Army had adopted a strategy that focused on winning over the support of the local population.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Perhaps the only thing that both sides of this debate agree on is a universal disdain for the “statistical metrics” that dominated and supposedly misguided commander’s assessment of the war. A prime example of this the account of John Prados in *The Columbia History of the Vietnam*, where he writes. “Perhaps the worst impact of attrition as the U.S. strategy in the Vietnam War was that it substituted statistical measures for visible goals.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This claim seems bizarrely out of touch, given the well-known debate on whether the U.S. did pursue a strategy of attrition and the obvious fact that the most devastating impact of such a strategy would be the massive loss of life involved. Moreover, this critique seems to ignore the problem that gave rise to these metrics in the first place. How are commanders supposed to know whether they are making progress toward their strategic goals?

This historical question has significant implications for modern military operations. John Nagl, one of the most prominent of the counter-insurgency experts, inspired a generation of post-Cold-War Army officers that Vietnam style quagmires are in fact “winnable” if only the military employs the right tactics and keeps strategy focused on the population. The implications of this notion became clear in the Global War on Terror when the US military again found itself as engaged prolonged struggled against an ideological enemy. Nagl himself served on General David Petraeus’s Counterinsurgency think-tank that sought to devise a new set of tactics to find success in the Iraq War.[[5]](#footnote-5) Ironically, whether the Petraeus’s “Surge” strategy was successful is another debate that hinges entirely on how one measures success in population-centric warfare.

More recent scholarship on the Vietnam War has been more sympathetic to the efforts of American commanders to lead a complex war, while acknowledge that in truth the war was likely never ours to win or lose. Proponents of this school of analysis suggest the multitude of quantitative measures developed over the course of the war should be viewed as evidence of the serious attempts U.S. military leaders made to understand and assess the various factors that make up counterinsurgency campaign. As Gregory Daddis, a prominent member of this school of thought, writes in *Westmoreland’s War*, “A sound strategy alone does not guarantee success, just as one general cannot control all the forces at play in a time of war.” [[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, rather ignoring efforts to model a war without fronts, scholarship should require a serious study of the methods that the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) employed.

Though this synthetic evaluation of the war has been acknowledged as a growing consensus among military historians, a quantitative study of the MACV’s metrics has yet to be completed. There are several studies of the “pacification” campaign to secure South Vietnam from Communist insurgents, including an early work by Daddis specifically on metrics for success and progress. In that work, Daddis writes, “How well MACV thought evaluation tools such as HES [the Hamlet Evaluation System] helped asses overall progress during the war is crucial to understanding the relationship between pacification programs and the American strategy.”[[7]](#footnote-7) If this is the case, than grappling with quantitative metrics on their own terms will certainly help illuminate new details of interest for historians. Considering the advances made in GIS technology since the late ‘60s, such an analysis stands a chance of finding the illusive “front-line.”

In addition to historical interest and scholarship, the viability of a data-based approach to human-centric warfare is a critical question to the modern military as the armed forces are increasingly called to compete and influence below the threshold of conventional conflict. These types of "gray-zone" and "hybrid" conflicts will inherently be "wars without fronts" in the sense of a geographic line of control. Without falling for the logic trap that sound tactics and strategy will grant the U.S. military complete control of conflicts, making an effort to understand the problems of the US Army's previous attempts to model abstract conflict is of vital importance to the modern military.

1. **Data Source and Analysis**

The Hamlet Evaluation System, as mentioned before, was chief among a suite of metrics designed to evaluate to progress towards securing South Vietnam for local and foreign insurgent forces.[[8]](#footnote-8) Between 1967 and 1974 military advisors tracked the progress of 12,650 Hamlets across South Vietnam monthly. This amounts to 1,062,600 observations in the whole dataset. The observations are broken into a fixed set of variables (asked monthly) and a periodic set (asked bimonthly or quarterly) which are stored in separate files. This means there are 36 separate raw txt files which store the various attributes over time. Additionally, a number of technical and data-dictionary documents are provided by the National Archive to help clarify the data.

As noted, the specific variables changed over time, but at a minimum each of the observations includes a date, location (recorded in MGRS), hamlet population, and political/military control, measured between the Viet Cong (VC) and Government of Vietnam (GVN). The data is already recorded in at tabular format (see example/data folder) but will likely require preprocessing to get it into a useable, modern format. Given that the data already has a tabular structure, I intend to R to tidy and trim the data to relevant columns before I begin the geocoding process.

Though more elaborate models can be constructed on the dataset, the aim of this project is simply to map the lines of control as recorded in the HES data. Since the data is currently recorded with point locations, geocoding to a point feature class should be straight forward and provides a couple of readily available spatial analysis techniques. The first technique, which will likely help with exploratory research, is to simply construct feature classes for a set of time periods with each hamlet as an individual point. This can used to quickly build choropleth maps using color to show areas of significant VC and GVN control. Alternatively, these point features classes could also be used to develop raster objects for each time-period of the study. The final technique I hope to leverage is emerging hotspot analysis, which could potentially reveal areas of contention between the two combatants.

The big remaining question for the analysis is what period to cover. Obviously, it would be ideal to plot the whole data, but the HES data collection methods and the variables collected changed significantly over time. This means that file structures change, making it difficult to reapply tidying and trimming techniques. Fortunately, the earliest files in the data categorized under the name HAMLA (the predecessor to the HES proper) are the very consistent and easier to read than the later HES files. Moreover, the HAMLA period includes the final potion of Westmoreland’s tenure as MACV chief (1967 -1969) and the entirety of the Tet Offensive and its aftermath.

1. **Deliverables**

The most significant deliverable of the project will be a geodatabase which includes the feature classes and rasters developed to visualize the shifting influence of VC and GCN forces. I anticipate publishing these on Esri Online and building a Story Map that explains the geocoding process and shares some of the most significant findings.

1. James McLeroy, “Vietnam War History: Orthodox Versus Revisionist”, *Small Wars Journal* (March 2019), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/vietnam-war-history-orthodox-versus-revisionist> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Micahel Kort, *The Vietnam War Reexamined*, (Cambridge University Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (The University of Chicago Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Prados et al, “American Strategy in the Vietnam War,” *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War,* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nagl’s current bio can be found at: <https://www.haverford.org/about-us/head-of-school-john-nagl> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Greggory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, (Oxford University Press, 2014), xxiv [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Greggory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory*: Measuring US Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hamlet Evaluation Files provided by the National Archives Online Catalog: [https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=\*:\*&rows=20&tabType=all&facet=true&facet.fields=oldScope,level,materialsType,fileFormat,locationIds,dateRangeFacet&highlight=true&f.parentNaId=4616225&f.level=fileUnit&sort=naIdSort%20asc](https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=*:*&rows=20&tabType=all&facet=true&facet.fields=oldScope,level,materialsType,fileFormat,locationIds,dateRangeFacet&highlight=true&f.parentNaId=4616225&f.level=fileUnit&sort=naIdSort%20asc) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)