The Hamlet Evaluation System - Reevaluated

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

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**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 commander’s assessment of the war.

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. Throughout the war, hundreds of thousands of observations were collected and analyzed by Army Operations Researchers and civilian contractors such as RAND. All these efforts aimed to answer the question, *"Was the US winning the war in Vietnam?"*

At the time and shortly after, many considered these metrics to be faulty, misguided and largely unsuccessful. 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 on 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 systems themselves or officers’ ability to grasp statistical and geographically diffuse metrics? The simple fact is that almost no study of the Vietnam War has dived into the data to answer these questions.

This analysis seeks to answer the above questions by applying modern data analytic and GIS techniques to understanding, modeling, and communicating the data collected in the HES. 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. This makes solving and understanding the problems of the US Army's previous attempts to model abstract conflict is of vital importance to the modern military.

1. **Data Source**

The declassification of materials from the Vietnam War has led to

1. **Overview**

The audience

1. https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/vietnam-war-history-orthodox-versus-revisionist [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.amazon.com/Vietnam-Reexamined-Cambridge-Essential-Histories/dp/1107628172 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.amazon.com/Learning-Eat-Soup-Knife-Counterinsurgency/dp/0226567702 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)