

# The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counter-insurgency

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*E*ditor's note: Due to the events of 9/11, the U.S. Army was forced to undergo a major retooling of its doctrine, practice, and support systems in order to deal with a plethora of unconventional adversaries that have subsequently not gone away. Part of this retooling was resuscitation and revitalization of counterinsurgency doctrine, largely moribund since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Among the hard lessons relearned over the last fifteen years is that the outcome of counterinsurgency largely depends on a range of political, economic, and cultural factors over which the U.S. military, or even the U.S. government, has marginal control. For example, most observers appear to agree that the highly successful counterinsurgency campaign that exploited the "Awakening" in Anbar Province, Iraq, from 2005 to 2008, which pitted largely Sunni tribes against al-Qaida operatives, opened a window of national reconciliation that was then completely undermined by the Shia parochialism of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's administration. As a result, many tribal members who had fought against al-Qaida joined with the Islamic State starting in 2013 to fight the Shia-dominated army and government, resulting in



(Photo courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps)

Dr. Bernard Fall, author of *The Street Without Joy*, takes a break 20 February 1967 with Company C, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, on Operation Chinook II. Fall was killed by an enemy booby trap the following day.

regional chaos and laying waste to what was formerly regarded as a U.S. counterinsurgency success.

It is against the backdrop of the current situation in Iraq, as well as similar setbacks in Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, Nigeria, and elsewhere, that the observations Bernard Fall made fifty years ago concerning a similarly unraveling situation in South Vietnam still apply. "The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency," which attributed strategic as well as tactical counterinsurgency failure to the alienation of the people from central government due to the parochial hubris of those in power, rings with particularly disturbing familiarity. His essay unmasks a prerequisite for counterinsurgency success encapsulated by the timeless observation that "when a country is being subverted it is not being outfought; it is being out-administered."

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If we look at the twentieth century alone, we are now in Vietnam faced with the forty-eighth “small war.” Let me just cite a few: Algeria, Angola, Arabia, Burma, Cameroon, China, Colombia, Cuba, East Germany, France, Haiti, Hungary, Indochina, Indonesia, Kashmir, Laos, Morocco, Mongolia, Nagaland [an Indian state on the Burmese border], Palestine, Yemen, Poland, South Africa, South Tyrol, Tibet, Yugoslavia, Venezuela, West Irian [Indonesia, on New Guinea], etc. This, in itself, is quite fantastic.

## The Century of “Small Wars”

In fact, if a survey were made of the number of people involved, or killed, in these forty-eight small wars it would be found that these wars, *in toto*, involved as many people as either one of the two world wars, and caused as many casualties. Who speaks of “insurgency” in Colombia? It is mere banditry, apparently. Yet it has killed two hundred thousand people so far and there is no end to it. The new Vietnam War, the “Second Indochina War” that began in 1956–57 and is still going on, is now going to reach in 1965, according to my calculations, somewhere around the two hundred thousand-dead mark. Officially, seventy-nine thousand dead are acknowledged, but this is far too low. These may be small wars as far as expended ordnance is concerned. But they certainly are not “small wars” in terms of territory or population, since such countries as China or Algeria were involved. These wars are certainly not small for the people who fight in them, or who have to suffer from them. Nor are they small, in many cases, for the counterinsurgency operator.

One of the problems one immediately faces is that of terminology. Obviously “sublimated warfare” is meaningless, and “insurgency” or “counterinsurgency” hardly define the problem. But the definition that I think will fit the subject is “revolutionary warfare” (RW).

Let me state this definition:  $RW = G + P$ , or, “revolutionary warfare equals guerrilla warfare plus political action.” This formula for revolutionary warfare is the result of the application of guerrilla methods to the furtherance of an ideology or a political system. This is the *real* difference between partisan warfare, guerrilla warfare, and everything else. “Guerrilla” simply means “small war,” to which the correct Army answer is (and that applies to *all* Western armies) that everybody

knows how to fight small wars; no second lieutenant of the infantry ever learns anything else but how to fight small wars. Political action, however, is the difference. The communists, or shall we say, any sound revolutionary warfare operator (the French underground, the Norwegian underground, or any other European anti-Nazi underground) most of the time used small-war tactics—not to destroy the German army, of which they were thoroughly incapable, but to establish a competitive system of control over the population. Of course, in order to do this, here and there they had to kill some of the occupying forces and attack some of the military targets. But above all they had to kill their own people who collaborated with the enemy.

But the “kill” aspect, the military aspect, definitely always remained the minor aspect. The political, administrative, ideological aspect is the primary aspect. Everybody, of course, by definition, will seek a military solution to the insurgency problem, whereas by its very nature, the insurgency problem is military only in a secondary sense, and political, ideological, and administrative in a primary sense. Once we understand this, we will understand more of what is actually going on in Vietnam or in some of the other places affected by RW.

## Recent and Not-So-Recent Cases

The next point is that this concept of revolutionary war can be applied by anyone anywhere. One doesn’t have to be white to be defeated. One doesn’t have to be European or American. Col. [Gamal Abdel] Nasser’s [president of Egypt, 1956–1970] recent experience in Yemen is instructive. He fought with forty thousand troops, Russian tanks, and Russian jets in Yemen against a few thousand barefoot Yemenite guerrillas. The tanks lost. After three years of inconclusive fighting, the Egyptian-backed Yemen regime barely holds the major cities, and Nasser is reported to be on the lookout for a face-saving withdrawal.

Look at the great Indian army’s stalemate by the Nagas. And who are the Nagas? They are a backward people of five hundred thousand on the northeastern frontier of India. After ten years of fighting, the Indian army and government are now negotiating with the Nagas. They have, for all practical purposes, lost their counterinsurgency operation. In other words (this is perhaps reassuring), losing an insurgency can happen to almost anybody. This is very important because one

more or less comes to accept as “fact” that losing counterinsurgency operations happens only to the West.

Very briefly, then, let me run through the real differences between, let us say, a revolutionary war and any other kind of uprising. A revolutionary war is usually fought in support of a doctrine, but a doctrine may be of a most variegated kind. It could be a peasant rebellion or it could be religion. For example, in Europe between the 1300s and the 1600s, as the feudal system evolved and then disappeared and was replaced by the early stages of the capitalist system, there were many peasant rebellions. Those peasant rebellions were fought, even though the people did not know it, for economic and social doctrines. The peasants were sick and tired of being serfs and slaves working for a feudal lord. Those peasant rebellions were in line with later socioeconomic movements. This is why the communists, of course, retroactively lay claim to the European peasant rebellions.

There were, of course, the religious wars in Europe—Protestant versus Catholic. Their doctrinal (ideological) character was self-explanatory. As soon as we run into that kind of war, not all the rich and not all the poor will stick together with their own kind. Doctrine somehow will cut across all social lines. This is often misunderstood. We look, for example, at the Viet Cong insurgency in Vietnam, and expect that all the Viet Cong are “communists” of low class. Then we find out that there are intellectuals in the Viet Cong. There are Buddhist priests, Catholic priests, and minority people. Hence, this very oversimplified view of the enemy falls by the wayside; we are now faced with something which is much more complicated and multifaceted, and the enemy, of



(Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

French troops seek cover in their trenches as Viet Minh forces attack with artillery, mounted on the hills in the distance, during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. The battle, fought March–May 1954, ultimately culminated in defeat for France by the Viet Minh revolutionaries in Vietnam.

course, thanks to doctrine, cuts across all classes. Pham Van Dong, the prime minister of Communist North Vietnam, is a high-ranking Vietnamese nobleman whose father was chief of cabinet to one of the late Vietnamese emperors. One of his colleagues at school was Ngo Dinh Diem [president of South Vietnam, 1955–1963], a high-ranking nobleman whose father also had been chief of cabinet to one of the Vietnamese emperors. Ho Chi Minh [founder of the Viet Minh and leader of North Vietnam, 1945–1969] was not exactly born on the wrong side of the tracks. His father had a master’s degree in the mandarin administration. This is very important.

In a doctrinal conflict there are people on both sides who probably embrace the whole social spectrum. Although communists will always claim that all the peasants and workers are on their side, they find out to their surprise that not all the peasants or workers are on their side. On the other hand, neither are all the elites on our side.

Finally, we have the French Revolutionary War and the American Revolutionary War. There is a difference between the two. The American Revolutionary War was literally a “national liberation war.” It did not advocate the upsetting of the existing socioeconomic structure in this new country called the United States. But the American Revolutionary War brought something into this whole field which nobody really studied, and that is the difference in certain types of foreign aid that the United States received during its liberation war. What basically made the difference between, say, [the Marquis de] Lafayette and [the Comte de] Rochambeau? Lafayette was an integrated military adviser, but Rochambeau commanded a separate military force. He commanded French forces fighting alongside the United States forces, whereas [Tadeusz] Kosciuszko, [Baron Friedrich] Von Steuben, and Lafayette were actually the allied parts of the army that were sandwiched in (the new word for this in Washington is “interlarded”) with the United States forces.

What would happen if American officers actually were put into the Vietnamese command channels—not as advisers, but as operators; or if a Vietnamese officer were to serve in the American Army like the Korean troops in the U.S. Army in Korea? Perhaps this is one approach to the problem of “advisersmanship.” There was a whole group of foreign officers in the American Revolutionary War army. Were they “mercenaries,” and if so, who paid them? I don’t know. Were they Rochambeau’s men or not? Or, what was the difference

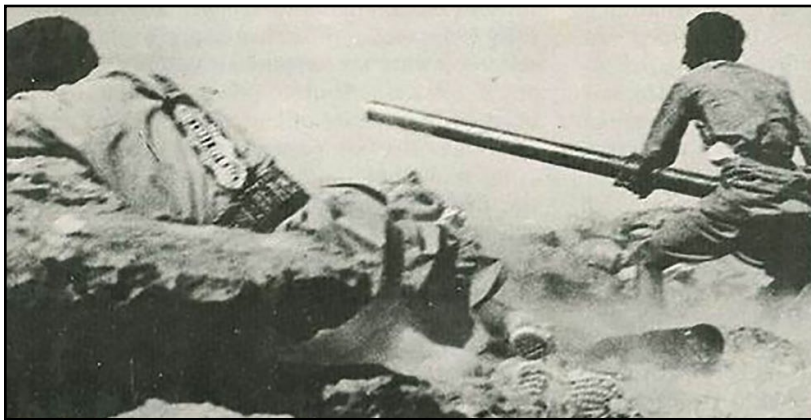
between Lafayette and the mercenaries of the Congo? I don't quite know. It would be interesting to find out.

The American Revolutionary War was a national liberation war in present-day terms. The French Revolution was, again, a social, economic, doctrinal war—a doctrinal revolution. In fact, it is amazing how well the doctrine worked. The French had developed three simple words: “*Liberté! Égalité! Fraternité!*” And that piece of propaganda held an enormous sway. For ten years after the French Revolution was dead and gone, French imperialism in the form of Napoleon marched through Europe taking over pieces of territories in the name of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Millions of people throughout Europe turned on their own natural or home-grown leaders believing that this French concept of liberty, equality, and fraternity was carried around at the point of French bayonets.

To be sure, in many cases, Napoleon left behind a legacy of orderly administration, of such things as the Napoleonic Code, but certainly Napoleon did not bring independence any more than the communists bring independence. He did bring a kind of Western order which was highly acceptable. To this day there are slight remnants of Napoleon's administration in the Polish Code. The streets are lined with poplar trees in Austria because Napoleon lined such streets 167 years ago.

One thing that Napoleon also brought with him was French occupation and the first true, modern guerrilla wars against his troops. For example, the word “guerrilla,” as we know it, comes from the Spanish uprising against the French. There were similar wars, for example, in Tyrol. The Tyrolians rose up under Andreas Hofer against the French. There were such uprisings in Russia also, although they were in support of an organized military force, the Russian army. In that case we speak of partisan warfare. We also had such things in Germany, the *Tugend-Bund*, the “Virtue League.” This was sort of a Pan-Germanic underground which got its people into the various German states to work for the liberation of the country from French occupation.

Very interestingly, we see the difference between Napoleon and some of the other leaders in the field of counterinsurgency. Napoleon tended to make his family



(Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Royalist Yemeni forces attempt to repel an Egyptian armored attack during the North Yemen Civil War. The conflict pitted semi-regular partisans and traditional tribesmen who supported the king of Yemen in a war against the conventional forces of the Yemen Arab Republic and its allies following a coup that had deposed the king in 1962. The war ended in 1970.

members and his cronies kings of those newly created French satellite states. One of his brothers, Joseph, got Spain, and Jerome got Westphalia, a French puppet state cut out in the Rhine area. The population of Westphalia rose up against Jerome. He sent a message to his brother saying, “I'm in trouble.” The answer returned was typically Napoleonic. It said, “By God, brother, use your bayonets. (Signed) Bonaparte.” A historic message came back from Jerome to his brother saying: “Brother, you can do anything with bayonets—except sit on them.” In other words: One can do almost anything with brute force except salvage an unpopular government. Jerome Bonaparte had the right idea, for *both* the right and wrong ideas about insurgency are just about as old as the ages. We have always found somebody who understood them.

What, then, did communism add to all this? Really very little. Communism has not added a thing that participants in other doctrinal wars (the French Revolution or the religious wars) did not know just as well. But communism did develop a more adaptable doctrine. The merit of communism has been to recognize precisely the usefulness of the social, economic, and political doctrines in this field for the purpose of diminishing as much as possible the element of risk inherent in the military effort. But if one prepares his terrain politically and organizes such things as a fifth column, one may reduce such risks by a great deal.

## Insurgency Indicators

The important thing is to know how to discover the symptoms of insurgency. This is where I feel that we are



(Photo courtesy of the U.S. Air Force)

Viet Cong terrorists exploded a bomb at 5:55 p.m. on 24 December 1964 in the garage area underneath the Brinks Hotel in Saigon, South Vietnam. The hotel, housing 125 military and civilian guests, was being used as officers' billets for U.S. Armed Forces in the Republic of Vietnam.

woefully lagging in Vietnam. I will show you how badly mistaken one can be in this particular field. For example, I have a Vietnamese briefing sheet in English which the Vietnamese government used to hand out. It is dated 1957 and is called *The Fight Against Communist Subversive Activities*. At the end of the last page it says: "From this we can see that the Viet Minh authorities have disintegrated and been rendered powerless." Famous last words!

Here is a communication by Professor Wesley Fishel, who was the American public police adviser in Vietnam in the late 1950s. He said in August 1958, "Indeed, Vietnam can be classed as about the most stable and peaceful country in all of Asia today." I would underline the fact that in 1958 the Vietnamese were losing something like three village chiefs a day. But village chiefs were not considered a military target. They were not considered part of our calculations with regard to what makes a war. For example, the *Infantry Journal* of August 1960 stated:

The Communist objectives, for the most part, have been thwarted by South Vietnamese military strength. Threats and actual attacks have been made on American advisers through their armed forces. The fact that

these attacks have been made is a good indication that the American aid is effective.

What this seems to mean is that if American advisers get killed in Vietnam we are doing fine. *The Air Force and Space Digest* of June 1962 stated:

There are a few things about the insurgent warfare that favor the use of air power and one of them is that the jungle rebels are not equipped with anti-aircraft, so that air superiority is practically assured.

That would be good news to the helicopter pilots, who represent the bulk of our casualties. In another *Air Force and Space Digest* article of August 1964 the following statement is made:

The figures of 1963 in the Vietnamese theater indicate that the cost/effectiveness of the air effort is high. It is estimated that the Vietnam Air Force uses less than 3 percent of the total military personnel. ... These planes account for more than a third of the total Viet Cong killed in action; that is 7,400 out of 20,600.

The joke, of course, if you can see the point, is that if 3 percent of the Vietnamese personnel effects 33 percent of the casualties, a simple tripling of that 3 percent of Air Force personnel would effect 100 percent of the casualties. Therefore, we need not send anybody else. But no one has considered that in all likelihood, of the 23,500 killed, a large part are noncombatant civilians. It is pretty hard to tell a Viet Cong [when you are] flying at two hundred fifty knots and from five hundred feet up, or more. This leads to the completely incongruous reasoning that if there are one hundred thousand Viet Cong in South Vietnam and the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] kills 23,500 a year and maims perhaps another 25,000, and if we divide 100,000 Viet Cong by 50,000 a year, the war should be over in two years. This meaningless equation probably accounted for 1963 estimates of victory by 1965. This is precisely where "cost/effectiveness" has its limitations.

Such reports point to a phenomenon which seems to conform to a pattern. Allow me to cite a report on the subject:

There was little or no realism in the sense of appreciating facts and conditions as they really were or were going to be, instead of what was imagined or wanted to be. The cause was fundamental, consisting of an academic bureaucratic outlook, based on little realistic practice and

formed in an environment utterly different to what we experienced in the war.

In the case of the staff this environment was in the cool of an office or the comfort of the road, scarcely ever the rubber jungle with its storms and claustrophobic oppressiveness. All seemed good in a good world. There was no inducement to look below the surface or to change our appreciations.

The document is declassified now. It is a report of a British colonel whose regiment was destroyed in Malaya by the Japanese in 1941. This document is twenty-three years old. Yet it sounds like a U.S. adviser from yesterday. Then as now everybody likes to fight the war that he knows best; this is very obvious. But in Vietnam we fight a war that we don't "know best." The sooner this is realized the better it is going to be.

When I first arrived in Indochina in 1953, the French were mainly fighting in the Red River Delta. This was the key French area in North Vietnam ... [with a] fortified French battle line. The French headquarters city was Hanoi. When I arrived I checked in with the French briefing officer and asked what the situation was in the Delta. He said:

Well, we hold pretty much of it; there is the French fortified line around the Delta which we call the "Marshal de Lattre Line"—about 2,200 bunkers forming nine hundred forts. We are going to deny the communists access to the eight million people in this Delta and the three million tons of rice it produces. We will eventually starve them out and deny them access to the population.

In other words, this was the strategic hamlet complex seen five thousand times bigger. There were about eight thousand villages inside that line. This fortified line also protected the rice fields then, whereas now the individual strategic hamlets do not protect the same fields. "Well," I said, "do the communists hold anything inside the Delta?" The answer was, "Yes, they hold those five black blotches" [on a map]. But at the University of Hanoi, which was under national Vietnamese control, my fellow Vietnamese students just laughed. They said that their home villages inside the Delta were communist-controlled and had communist village chiefs, and just about everybody else said the same thing: that both the French and the Vietnamese army simply did not know what was going on.

Most of these villages were, in fact, controlled by the communists and I decided to attempt to document that control. It was actually very simple. To the last breath a government will try to collect taxes. So I used a working hypothesis; I went to the Vietnamese tax collection office in Hanoi to look at the village tax rolls. They immediately indicated that the bulk of the Delta was no longer paying taxes. As a cross-check on my theory I used the village teachers.

The school teachers in Vietnam were centrally assigned by the government. Hence, where there were school teachers the government could be assumed to have control. Where there were none, there was no government control. [I produced a map that showed] the difference between military "control" and what the communists controlled *administratively*, which was 70 percent of the Delta inside the French battle lines! This was *one year before the Battle of Dien Bien Phu*, in May 1954. In fact, the [official military situation maps—showing only small, isolated areas believed to be less than 30 percent French-controlled—were] complete fiction and had absolutely no bearing on the *real* situation inside the Delta. Of course, when regular communist divisions became available to attack the Delta in June 1954, the whole illusion collapsed. ... The last French battle line before the ceasefire [lay deep in a zone that was, in fact, solidly] communist-infiltrated and, of course, it collapsed overnight. That is revolutionary warfare. You now have seen the difference between the two.

## Revolutionary Warfare in South Vietnam

When I returned to Vietnam in 1957, after the Indochina War had been over for two years, everybody was telling me that the situation was fine. However, I noticed in the South Vietnamese press obituaries of village chiefs, and I was bothered. I thought there were just too many obituaries—about one a day—allegedly killed not by communists, but by "unknown elements," and by "bandits." I decided to plot out a year's worth of dead village officials. The result was that I counted about 452 dead village chiefs to my knowledge at that time. Then I also saw in the press, and here and there in Vietnam heard, discussions about "bandit attacks." These attacks were not made at random, but in certain areas. That too worried me, so I decided to plot the attacks. I immediately noted in both cases a very strange pattern. The attacks on the village chiefs were "clustered" in certain areas.

I went to see the Vietnamese minister of the interior, Nguyen Huu Chau, who then was, incidentally, the brother-in-law of Madame Nhu [Diem's sister-in-law], and I said to him: "Your Excellency, there is something I'm worried about. You know that I was in the North when the French were losing and I noticed the village chiefs disappearing and I think you now have the same problem here." He said, "What do you mean?" So I just showed him the map. He said, "Well, since you found that out all by yourself, let me show you *my* map." And he pulled out a map which showed not only the village chiefs but also the communist cells operating in South Vietnam in 1957–58, when Vietnam was at peace and there was supposedly nothing going on. It was wonderful. We all congratulated each other. Yet, very obviously, to use a somewhat unscientific term, the whole Mekong Delta was going "to hell in a basket," and much of South Vietnam with it.<sup>1</sup>

The insurgency cross-check was unexpectedly provided to me by the International Control Commission (ICC). They get reports from the communists as well as from our side, but in this case what interested me was the alleged incidents inside South Vietnam. The communists would report from Hanoi, through the ICC, that Americans or Vietnamese were doing certain things out in the villages which Hanoi alleged were "violations" of the ceasefire agreement. I said to myself, "If I plot out all the communist reports about alleged violations on a map, and if they match high-incident areas, there may be a logical connection between the guerrilla operators and the intelligence operators who provide the basis for the

ICC reports." Sure enough, the same areas with the high incidents also had high reports. As of early 1958, I knew we were in deep trouble in Vietnam and I kept saying so.

In 1959 the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization gave me a research grant to do a study on communist infiltration in the area. One of the results of the study: Saigon was deliberately encircled and cut off from the hinterland with a "wall" of dead village chiefs. President Kennedy, in his second State of the Union message on 25 May 1961, stated that during the past year (meaning April 1960–61) the communists killed *four thousand minor officials* in Vietnam! This was one year before the [Maxwell] Taylor Report which got the whole American major effort going. In other words, in 1960 and 1961 the communists killed *eleven village officials a day*. By the time we woke up and learned that we had a problem, the communists had killed about ten thousand village chiefs in a country that has about sixteen thousand villages. This, gentlemen, is "control"—not the military illusion of it.

From then on, it was open and shut. One year later, in 1963, somebody discovered that my system of judging insurgent control from tax returns was applicable to South Vietnam also. ... [The U.S. Agency for International Development, or AID, produced figures that] reflected the situation for March–May 1963, six months before Diem was overthrown, and four months before the Buddhist outbreaks. To make a long story short, in twenty-seven provinces the communists ... were formally collecting taxes with bonds, receipts, and tax declarations. In [ten more areas] they were collecting taxes on an informal basis. There were only three provinces out of forty-five which reported no communist tax collections!

## The Erroneous Criteria of "Success"

I have emphasized that the straight military aspects, or the conventional military aspects of insurgency, are not the most important. Tax collections have nothing to do with helicopters. Village chiefs have nothing to do with M-113s [armored personnel carriers] except in the most remote sense, nor with the aerial bombardment of North Vietnam. What we are faced with precisely is a communist, military-backed operation to take over a country under our feet. I would like to put it in even a simpler way: *When a country is being subverted it is not being*



(Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Viet Minh communist-nationalist revolutionaries plant their flag over a captured French position in Vietnam during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954.

*outfought; it is being out-administered.* Subversion is literally administration with a minus sign in front. This is what I feel has to be clearly understood. Whether it is the Congo, Vietnam, or Venezuela is totally irrelevant. Whether we have the “body count,” the “kill count,” the “structure count,” or the “weapons count”—these are almost meaningless considerations in an insurgency situation. We can lose weapons and still win the insurgency. On the other hand, we can win the war and lose the country.

We always hang on for dear life to the Malayan example, which, of course, is totally unworkable. The only thing that Vietnam has which resembles Malaya is the climate. We don't give the communists credit for making mistakes, yet Malaya was one of their big mistakes. They actually decided to take on the British in a straight-forward military operation and, predictably, failed.

If revolutionary war simply were jungle war, every regular force could win it. Americans know how to fight jungle wars. One can fight a revolutionary war in Norway, or fight a revolutionary war in France. It doesn't take a jungle to fight a revolutionary war. One can take over villages not only in the highlands of Vietnam, but in the lowlands of Belgium the same way. This is, of course, the key point. Remember that the British fought in Cyprus, and seemingly had everything in their favor. It is an island half the size of New Jersey. The Royal Navy, which can be trusted to do its job, sealed off the island from the outside. There were forty thousand British troops on Cyprus under Field Marshal Sir John Harding, and his opponent, Col. [George] Grivas, had three hundred Greeks in the EOKA [National Organization of Cypriot Struggle]. The ratio between regular troops and guerrillas was 110-to-1 in favor of the British! After five years the British preferred to come to terms with the rebels.

The French in Algeria learned every lesson from the French in Vietnam. The troop ratio there was a comfortable 11-to-1; the French had 760,000 men, the Algerians

had 65,000. The French very effectively sealed off the Algerian-Tunisian border, and by 1962 had whittled down the guerrillas from sixty-five thousand to seven thousand. But the French were winning at the expense of being the second-most-hated country in the world,



(Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

An Algerian Armée de Libération Nationale insurgent fires a mortar across the Morce Line from inside Tunisia at French positions in Algeria (circa 1958). The Morce Line was a narrow 320-mile stretch of territory along the border between the two states fortified by an electrified fence, barbed wired, and mines.

after South Africa, in the United Nations. They were giving the whole Western alliance a black name.<sup>2</sup> At what price were the French winning? Well, 760,000 men out of the about one million men of the French armed forces were tied down in Algeria. It cost three million dollars a day for *eight years*, or \$12 billion in French money. No American aid was involved. The “price” also included two mutinies of the French army and one overthrow of the

civilian government. At that price the French were winning the war in Algeria *militarily*. The fact was that the military victory was totally meaningless. This is where the word “grandeur” applies to President de Gaulle: he was capable of seeing through the trees of military victory to a forest of political defeat and he chose to settle the Algerian insurgency by other means.

Some of these wars, of course, *can* be won, as in the Philippines, for example. The war was won there *not* through military action (there wasn't a single special rifle invented for the Philippines, let alone more sophisticated ordnance) but through an extremely well-conceived civic action program and, of course, a good leader—[Ramon] Magsaysay.

Civic action is not the construction of privies or the distribution of antimalarial sprays. One can't fight an ideology; one can't fight a militant doctrine with better privies. Yet this is done constantly. One side says, “land reform,” and the other side says, “better culverts.” One side says, “We are going to kill all those nasty village chiefs and landlords.” The other side says, “Yes, but look, we want to give you prize pigs to improve your strain.” These arguments just do not match. Simple but adequate appeals will have to be found sooner or later.



## Conclusion

What, then, can be done in a war like Vietnam? Does the West have to lose such wars automatically? I said at the beginning that even the non-Westerners can lose those wars. But, either way, one must attempt to preserve the essentials. The question in my mind is this: Can we in Vietnam, or anywhere else, save (or improve) the administrative or governmental structure? The answer is obvious, and there is no other effort really worth doing. We have tried this with the “strategic hamlets” and that literally failed. Out of 8,500 strategic hamlets, about 1,400 survived the effort. Some people have spoken of what is called the “oil-slick principle,” which has been described as the holding of one particular area, one central area, and working one’s way out of the center. That was fine when the French developed the concept for the Sahara, because in the Sahara there are obligatory watering points. If they have all the oases, those outside have to come in and get water. But Vietnam doesn’t happen to be the Sahara or an oasis. Thus, the oil-slick method succeeds mostly in pushing the Viet Cong units into the next province. Of course, it looks good, at least, because

for one week there will be a “cleared” province. For the time being this is considered adequate until something more imaginative is discovered.

The actual thing that can be done, and is also being done, is what the French call *quadrillage* (gridding). One doesn’t start from the center of something and work one’s way out, but he starts from the periphery and works one’s way *in*. The chances are that if it is done right, and if it is done in enough places at once, some communist units will finally get fixed (as the army says) and caught. This may yet work, but this requires a high degree of manpower saturation not available in Vietnam.

There are no easy shortcuts to solving the problems of revolutionary war. In fact, I would like to close with one last thought, which applies, of course, to everything that is done in the armed forces, but particularly to revolutionary war: *If it works, it is obsolete*. In Vietnam and in many other similar situations we have worked too often with well-working but routine procedures and ideas. It is about time that new approaches and—above all—ideas be tried; obviously, the other ones have been unequal to the task. ■

*Bernard B. Fall was born in 1926 in Austria to Jewish parents but escaped temporarily with his family to France after the Nazi annexation of that country. His parents were later captured and killed as part of Hitler’s “Final Solution.” At age sixteen, he joined the French Resistance and fought in the French underground from 1942 to 1944. He then joined the French 4th Moroccan Mountain Division, in which he served until 1946. After resigning from the French army, he served from 1946 to 1948 as a war crimes investigator at Nuremberg. Subsequently, he was educated at the University of Paris, the Ludwig-Max University (Munich), and Syracuse University, where he began his field research in Indochina in 1953. He later joined the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University in 1954, and completed a PhD from Syracuse in 1955. He then moved to Howard University in 1956, where he became a professor of international relations and spent the remainder of his academic career. During the course of his research through the 1950s and 1960s, he made frequent trips to Southeast Asia to collect information and observe first hand unfolding events. He was among the first to predict the failure of France in its efforts to retain colonial control over Indochina, as well as the failure of the United States in its prosecution of the war in Vietnam because of what he noted were tactics formulated without an understanding of the societies in which the conflict was being fought. He was widely known for his writings on the French and American experiences in Vietnam. He died in Hué, South Vietnam, in 1967, patrolling with U.S. Marines on Highway 1 as part of a writing research project.*

## Notes

1. Cf. Bernard Fall, “South Viet-Nam’s Internal Problems,” *Pacific Affairs*, September 1958.

2. For example, when the French effected a reprisal raid on rebel bases in Tunisia on 8 February 1958, several senior U.S.

leaders expressed shock and demanded the return to U.S. control of American-made aircraft used by the French.