Part 2: The Cold War, 1945–75

Vietcong tactics 1964–68

In early 1965 the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had about 170,000 soldiers. They were well supplied with weapons and equipment from China and the USSR, but they were heavily outnumbered and outgunned by the South Vietnamese forces and their US allies. The Communist forces were no match for the US and South Vietnamese forces in open warfare. In November 1965 in the La Dgreng Valley, US forces killed 2000 Viet Cong for the loss of 300 troops. This did not daunt Ho Chi Minh. He believed that superior forces could be defeated by guerrilla tactics. He had been in China and seen Mao Zedong use guerrilla warfare to achieve a Communist victory there. Ho had also used these guerrilla tactics himself against the Japanese and the French. The principles were simple: retreat when the enemy attacks; raid when the enemy camps; attack when the enemy tires; pursue when the enemy retreats.

Guerrilla warfare was a nightmare for the US army. Guerrillas did not wear uniform. They had no known base camp or headquarters. They worked in small groups with limited weapons. They were hard to tell apart from the peasants in the villages. They attacked and then disappeared into the jungle, into the villages or into their tunnels (see Source 13).

The aim of guerrilla attacks was to wear down the enemy soldiers and wreck their morale. This was very effective. US soldiers lived in constant fear of ambushes or booby traps. Booby traps could be simple devices such as tripwires or pits filled with sharpened bamboo stakes. Weapons like these were cheap and easy to make and very effective in disrupting US patrols. One of the most unpopular duties in a patrol was going ‘on point’. This meant leading the patrol, checking for traps. There were other more sophisticated traps such as the Bouncing Betty land mine. This would be thrown into the air when triggered and would then explode causing terrible injuries to the stomach or groin. Booby traps caused about 11 per cent of US casualties.

Another 51 per cent of casualties were caused by small arms fire in ambushes or ‘firefights’. The Viet Cong and NVA quickly learned to fear American air power, so when they did attack they tried to make sure it was close-quarter fighting. This meant that US air power or artillery could not be used because of the danger of hitting their own troops. This tactic was sometimes known as ‘hanging on to American belts’.

Ho knew how important it was to keep the population on his side. The Viet Cong fighters were expected to be courteous and respectful to the Vietnamese peasants. They often helped the peasants in the fields during busy periods.

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**SOURCE 13**

A Viet Cong tunnel complex. To avoid the worst effects of American air power, the Viet Cong built a vast network of underground tunnels, probably around 240 km of them.

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**SOURCE 14**

A diagram showing one type of booby trap. A trap pit is a large trap box with a bamboo top. Stakes are made of sharpened bamboo or barbed spikes and used to line the box. When a man steps on the trap he will fall into the pit. The top turns on an axle; therefore, the trap does not need to be reset to work again. The pit is often prepared as a defensive obstacle and then made safe by locking it in place with a crossbeam (so it can be crossed safely by the enemy) until the desired time of use.
Why did the USA fail in Vietnam?

One Viet Cong leader said: ‘The people are the water. Our armies are the fish.’ What do you think he meant?

Choose one piece of evidence to show that the Viet Cong had the support of the Vietnamese people.

Choose one piece of evidence that suggests that they did not.

**SOURCE 15**

A Viet Cong poster.

**SOURCE 17**

In the military respect, it is easier to destroy the puppet troops than the American troops, for the American troops have not had much fighting with us, thus are optimistic and have patriotic pride. The puppet troops [South Vietnamese forces] have lost a lot of battles and now have little enthusiasm to fight. Therefore, our plan is to wipe out the puppet troops.

On the other hand our propaganda will emphasize the slogan ‘Find the Americans to kill’. We need to use the methods most suited for destroying the American troops – guerrilla forces encircling the American troops’ bases. This upcoming spring and summer, we are aiming for killing about 10,000 Americans as already planned and for the next few years, we should at least kill 40,000 to 50,000 Americans. This is a new goal which will determine our victory. Along with trying to lessen the Americans’ strength, we should try to cause great loss of American aircraft, at the same time, curb their activities.

. . . We must not neglect the political war. I just talked about the possibility and necessity to strengthen the political war. Even though the US brings in more troops to Vietnam, they will fail to weaken our political power. In fact, our political power is likely to be enhanced and the US will be isolated and fail miserably. The more troops the US brings in, the more military bases it builds, the larger area it occupies, the more sophisticated weapons it uses, the more B.52 bombs it drops, the more chemical poisons it uses, the worse the conflict between our people and them becomes, the more our people hate them.

Extracts from a letter written in 1965 by Le Duan, Secretary of the North Vietnamese Communist Party and one of Ho Chi Minh’s closest associates. The letter was explaining how North Vietnam was planning to react to the large scale arrival of US forces in 1965.

**SOURCE 18**

. . . Kien knows the area well. It was here, at the end of the dry season of 1969, that his Battalion 27 was surrounded and almost totally wiped out. Ten men survived from the Unlucky Battalion, after fierce, horrible, barbarous fighting.

That was the dry season when the sun burned harshly, the wind blew fiercely, and the enemy sent napalm spraying through the jungle and a sea of fire enveloped them, spreading like the fires of hell. Troops in the fragmented companies tried to regroup, only to be blown out of their shelters again as they went mad, became disoriented and threw themselves into nets of bullets, dying in the flaming inferno. Above them the helicopters flew at tree-top height and shot them almost one by one, the blood spreading out, spraying from their backs, flowing like red mud. The diamond-shaped grass clearing was piled high with bodies killed by helicopter gunships. Broken bodies, bodies blown apart, bodies vaporised. No jungle grew again in this clearing. No grass. No plants.

‘Better to die than surrender my brothers! Better to die!’ the Battalion Commander yelled insanely, waving his pistol in front of Kien be he blew his own brains out through his ear. Kien screamed soundlessly in his throat as the Americans attacked with sub-machine-guns, sending bullets buzzing like deadly bees around him. Then Kien lowered his machine-gun, grasped his side and fell, rolling slowly down the bank of a shallow stream, body trailing down the slope after him.

Extract from The Sorrow of War. This was a novel by Bao Ninh, a North Vietnamese soldier who fought the Americans in Vietnam in 1969. The novel was based on his experiences.
Part 2: The Cold War, 1945–75

US tactics

Bombing

On 7 February 1965 the USA launched Operation Rolling Thunder. Rolling Thunder involved extensive bombing raids on military and industrial targets in North Vietnam. It was the beginning of an air offensive that was to last until 1972. The list of targets was soon expanded to include towns and cities in North and South Vietnam. The list also included sites in Laos and Cambodia along the Ho Chi Minh trail. More bombs were dropped on North Vietnam than were dropped in the whole of the Second World War on Germany and Japan.

To some extent bombing was effective.

- It certainly damaged North Vietnam’s war effort and it disrupted supply routes.
- It enabled the USA to strike at Communist forces even when it was reducing US ground forces in Vietnam after 1969.
- From 1970 to 1972, intense bombing campaigns against Hanoi (North Vietnam’s capital) and the port of Haiphong forced the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table.

However, US air power could not defeat the Communists – it could only slow them down. The Viet Cong continued to operate its supply lines. Even after major air raids on North Vietnam in 1972, the Communists were still able to launch a major assault on the South.

The cost of the air war was horrendous. The Communists shot down 14,000 US and South Vietnamese aircraft. In 1967 the American Life magazine calculated that it cost the USA $400,000 to kill one Viet Cong fighter, a figure that included 75 bombs and 400 artillery shells.

Chemical weapons

The US developed a powerful chemical weapon called Agent Orange. It was a sort of highly toxic ‘weedkiller’. It was used to destroy the jungle where the Viet Cong hid. The Americans used 82 million litres of Agent Orange to spray thousands of square kilometres of jungle. Napalm was another widely-used chemical weapon. It destroyed jungles where guerrillas might hide. It also burned through skin to the bone. Many civilians and soldiers were also killed by these chemical weapons.

SOURCE

People in the South Vietnamese city of Hue sort through the wreckage of their homes after a US bombing raid in 1968.

A ten-year-old Vietnamese girl runs naked after tearing her burning clothes from her body following a napalm attack. This photograph became one of the most enduring images of the war.
**Search and destroy**

Bombing could not defeat a guerrilla army. The US commander General Westmoreland developed a policy of search and destroy. He established secure and heavily defended US bases in the south of the country and near to the coasts. From here, US and South Vietnamese forces launched search-and-destroy raids from helicopters. They would descend on a village and destroy any Viet Cong forces they found. Soldiers had to send back reports of body counts.

Search-and-destroy missions did kill Viet Cong soldiers, but there were problems.

- The raids were often based on inadequate information.
- Inexperienced US troops often walked into traps.
- Innocent villages were mistaken for Viet Cong strongholds.
- Civilian casualties were extremely high in these raids. For every Viet Cong weapon captured by search-and-destroy, there was a body count of six. Many of these were innocent civilians.
- Search-and-destroy tactics made the US and South Vietnamese forces very unpopular with the peasants. It pushed them towards supporting the Viet Cong.

**SOURCE 21**

US troops on a search-and-destroy mission in Vietnam. These were sometimes called ‘Zippo raids’, after the Zippo cigarette lighters that were often used to burn villages.