After Vietnam

Legacies of a Lost War

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Preparing *Not* to Refight the Last War

The Impact of the Vietnam War on the U.S. Military

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I am often asked how I came to devote much of my career to the study of the Vietnam War. I always respond that I don't have a good answer. It just happened.

I was one of that lucky post–World War II generation too young to serve in Korea, too old to serve in Vietnam. I first became conscious of Vietnam as an eighteen-year-old college sophomore during the spring of 1954, fearing that if the United States intervened to save the French at Dien Bien Phu, I might be called to arms.

That did not happen, of course; but, like other males of my generation, I faced a military obligation. Because I had no clue what I wanted to do with my life and because I did not want to be drafted into the Army, I entered the Navy's Officer Candidate School. Some of my college and OCS classmates who went on to military careers served in Vietnam. I did a short tour in the Navy and in 1960 entered graduate school at the University of Virginia.

Growing up in the Cold War era, I was keenly interested in foreign policy and things military, and I early decided to concentrate on diplomatic and military history. During my graduate school days, I was, I suspect, no more conscious than most other Americans of the steadily escalating conflict in Vietnam. I do remember vividly the picture of the Buddhist monk engulfed in flames in summer 1963, the Tonkin Gulf incident, and the election of 1964.

It was only after I began teaching at Ohio University in the fall of 1965 that I, like the rest of the country, became connected to Vietnam. Teaching courses in the history of U.S. foreign policy, I found myself in the midst of an increasingly heated debate on what was now a war, and I began to educate myself on the subject. What I found, probing beneath the surface even just a bit, was so blatantly at odds with the official view and the myopic and unhistorical view presented in the popular media that I could not but look at the war differently. These early historical explorations aroused a curiosity that has remained acute for nearly thirty-five years.

During my time at Ohio University and, after 1969, at the University of Kentucky, Vietnam came to absorb all of us. It was always in the forefront; in classes, the discussion invariably turned to it, no matter what the day's topic. I recall impassioned discussions with students facing the draft and with returned veterans who would admit their service only behind closed doors. In the spring of 1973, I taught my first course on the war, a seminar in which roughly half the students had served in Vietnam, half had protested the war, and some had done both. It was among the most powerful teaching experiences of my life.

Shortly after the fall of Saigon, I wrote a brief essay on the war. I was going to call it "America's Longest War," but the editor did not like that title, so we called it "Vietnam: An American Ordeal." I found the experience of giving the war a history so challenging that I proposed to Professor Robert Divine a book for his America in Crisis series. He was a bit skeptical at first, since the war was so close and the nation so disposed to forget it. But his initial caution turned to enthusiastic support. I spent the years 1975 to 1979 absorbed in the book. I had planned to finish it and go on to something else. Instead, for the next twenty years I continued to spend much of my time studying and teaching about the war. It has been a moving and at times emotionally wrenching experience to witness the hold it continues to have on the nation and especially on those individuals

directly affected by it. It has been fascinating as a historian to observe and at times participate in the ongoing and still-heated debate on the war's meaning and lessons—of which the essay that follows is a small part.

■

Toward the latter part of the conflict in Vietnam, journalist Ward Just overheard a senior U.S. officer snarl, "I'll be damned if I permit the United States Army, its institutions, its doctrine, and its traditions to be destroyed just to win this lousy war."[1] As it turned out, of course, the United States did not win that "lousy war." And despite the best efforts of the above-quoted officer and presumably others, the institutions, doctrine, and traditions of all the military services were severely shaken, if not destroyed, in the process of waging it.

The Vietnam War had a profound impact on a once-proud U.S. military establishment, calling into question its conviction, born of its decisive role in two world wars, that it was invincible; challenging, as perhaps nothing before in its history, its faith that the massive application of force was the solution to military problems. Precisely because the war's impact was so great, the armed services could not avoid dealing with the Vietnam experience, as the rest of American society seemed content to do in the immediate postwar years. Military leaders engaged their respective services in an intensive and searching self-analysis that produced a veritable revolution in organization, recruitment, training, education, and doctrine. The Vietnam War thus significantly reshaped the U.S. military.

In another, perhaps more fundamental sense, the military did not deal with Vietnam at all. Many of those responsible for rebuilding military institutions concluded that failure in Vietnam had been the result not of their way of doing things but rather of restrictions imposed on them by civilian leaders. Vietnam thus had little if any impact on postwar military doctrine. Those officers who assumed top leadership positions in the 1980s and 1990s also steadfastly opposed going to war except under the most favorable circumstances—circumstances, obviously, distinctly different from those of Vietnam. The Persian Gulf War vindicated the post-Vietnam military reforms and in some ways exorcised the demons of Vietnam. Within the U.S. military establishment and especially in civil-military relations, however, the effects of that war still linger, with uncertain implications for the future.

I

Long before the last U.S. combat troops departed Vietnam, the once-mighty U.S. military machine had begun to break down. As early as 1971, an expert on military affairs reported that by "every conceivable indicator" the forces remaining in Vietnam were in "a state of approaching collapse."[2] The signs were obvious even to those senior officers who would have preferred to ignore them. A pervasive breakdown of discipline manifested itself in such relatively innocent things as the hippie-like appearance of GIs in the field—the wearing of long hair, love beads, and peace symbols. It was also apparent in the refusal of fighting men to wear helmets in combat and in the promiscuous throwing of grenades. By this time in the war, GIs were as likely to question as to obey orders, and they were less willing to risk their lives in combat. Officers seemed intimidated by troublemakers, and tolerated what Colin Powell later called "outrageous behavior." AWOL and desertion rates rose dramatically. In both the Army and the Marines, individual soldiers and indeed entire units sometimes refused to go into battle, and officers and men cut deals to undertake "search and evade" missions that would keep them out of harm's way. More serious yet was an epidemic of "fragging" incidents—deliberate efforts, usually on the part of enlisted men, to get rid of unpopular or overly aggressive officers by rolling fragmentation grenades into their quarters or clubs.[3]

Drug abuse skyrocketed in the last years of the war. It is impossible to arrive at reliable figures, but a random sample of GIs leaving

South Vietnam in September 1971 revealed that 67 percent had at least experimented with marijuana and 45 percent with hard drugs. Of the 2,500 soldiers evacuated for medical reasons in September 1971, 55 percent were drug abusers rather than battle casualties.[4] Drug use does not appear to have been widespread in the field or to have hampered combat operations, but it was pervasive among support troops and in rear areas.

Throughout all the services and at military installations around the world, racial tensions mounted. The military was the most racially integrated of all American institutions, but African Americans still had not made it into the upper echelons in large numbers. They complained that the system of military justice was skewed against them. Their demands were increasingly militant, a demeanor that was provoked by deeply ingrained racist attitudes among whites and that in turn exposed such attitudes. Racial tensions were generally kept in check in combat situations, but the rear areas seethed. Blacks and whites voluntarily resegregated themselves off duty, and such loaded symbols as Confederate flags and Black Power salutes provoked open conflict.

At best ambivalent in the early days of U.S. involvement, GI attitudes toward the South Vietnamese grew openly hostile as the war ground toward its agonizing end. As morale disintegrated after the Tet Offensive of 1968, Americans increasingly vented their frustration on their nominal allies. Soldiers fired weapons at civilians, hurled rocks and cans at villagers, and drove vehicles in life-threatening ways. "Many armies have dealt harshly with enemy populations," journalist Jonathan Schell wrote in 1970, "but ours certainly is one of the first to deal so harshly with its allies." The most notorious example, of course, and the one that made obvious the breakdown of the Army, was the massacre of 504 Vietnamese civilians by an American company at the village of My Lai in the spring of 1968. The incident and its subsequent cover-up made clear to senior officers who had long kept their heads in the sand that they faced a major crisis.[5]

The causes of the breakdown now seem clear. Any military establishment is a reflection of the society that creates it, and the servicemen brought with them to Vietnam and other military posts the drug problems and racial tensions that wracked the United States. The permissiveness that marked the youth culture of the 1960s carried over into a lack of respect for authority in the military. The length of the war caused growing problems, and after 1968, the obvious fact that the nation had abandoned any thought of winning could not help but affect morale. Boredom and restlessness pervaded rear areas, while combat was at once "dangerous and seemingly devoid of success." No one wanted to be the last American to die in a cause that was obviously lost.[6]

The way the war was fought contributed decisively to the military breakdown. The manpower pool was sharply limited by President Lyndon Johnson's refusal to mobilize the reserves and by a grossly inequitable selective service system that provided a safety net to the best and brightest of American youth. At the same time, the expansion of the war after 1965, the one-year tour, and a high casualty rate created escalating demands for more GIs. Draft boards and recruiting officers lowered their standards, and the services took growing numbers of "foxhole fillers"—less and less well qualified individuals who caused more and more problems.[7] Pressured to fill slots, they rushed troops to Vietnam without the training and preparation necessary to deal with an increasingly difficult situation. The necessity of creating from scratch an entirely new supply of junior officers and noncoms had especially serious consequences for discipline and morale.[8]

The services contributed to their own problems. An Army War College study commissioned by Army Chief of Staff Gen. William C. Westmoreland after the My Lai exposé concluded that an absence of leadership had produced predictable results. In a damning indictment, the study found that "careerism" and "ticket-punching" had replaced the traditional ethics of the officer. Increasingly bureaucratized management practices, the peculiar

dynamics of a limited war, and the one-year tour and even more frequent rotation of officers destroyed unit cohesion and put the emphasis on career advancement rather than performance. The bureaucracy's voracious appetite for numbers, a result of the computer age and the managerial revolution instituted at the Pentagon by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, led the services to focus on what could be quantified rather than the more abstract and elusive concept of leadership. Officers thus concentrated on the trivial and the short-term rather than more important and longer-term matters. Incompetence and its cover-up became standard operating procedures. Shocked by the study, Westmoreland labeled it a "masterpiece" and promptly restricted its circulation to the Army's top officers.[9]

The fall of Saigon in April 1975 had a devastating effect on officers throughout the military establishment. "I grieved as though I had lost a member of my family," a senior officer later recalled, and the harsh reality of failure and defeat left many officers angry and embittered.[10] Some sensibly recognized that even the vast power of the United States had limits. Many more felt betrayed by a civilian leadership that, they alleged, had forced them to fight with one hand tied behind their back. Some complained that the hostility of the media, the antiwar movement, and Congress had snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. Many officers left the service in anger. Some stayed and turned their attention to the seemingly more pressing—and more manageable—problem of the Soviet threat in Europe.[11]

II

Among those who stayed, some officers dedicated their careers to restoring a shattered military to a position of respect and effectiveness, and between 1975 and 1985 the services implemented a series of major reforms. Some were instituted voluntarily; others were imposed by outside authority. Most were based squarely on perceived lessons of Vietnam. The results were little short of revolutionary.

Well before the end of the war, all of the services began to put their respective houses in order, in the process instituting changes that went to the very heart of traditional military culture. The first step, of course, was to restore discipline and order, and here tough measures were often used. The Marines initially dealt with troublemakers in ways that seem almost stereotypical, kicking them out through administrative discharges.[12] At installations across the world, Powell later recalled, Army officers sought to regain control by making clear to soldiers that "I'm in charge and you ain't." Even then, it was the end of the decade before a semblance of order was restored in each of these services.[13]

But the changes went much deeper. Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Adm. Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr. sought to adapt his service to changing times—and to boost reenlistments—by such reforms as providing more shore time for sailors, liberalizing provisions for liberty and leave, and eliminating what he later called "chickenshit" and "Mickey Mouse" regulations. The Navy also sought to address its deeply entrenched racial problems by broadening opportunities for minorities, establishing councils to discuss racial issues, and placing in Naval Exchange stores items used by African Americans. A new generation of officers tried to "recast the cultural and social mores of the Army to make them relevant to a new generation of Americans." In the process, they "gored some of the Army's most sacred cows," instituting the eight-hour day and five-day week, eliminating Saturday morning inspections, getting rid of the dreaded KP, permitting long hair, replacing open barracks with two-person rooms, and even putting beer machines in barracks.[14]

In the aftermath of Vietnam, the nation changed dramatically the way troops were raised and mobilized. One of the most fundamental of the post-Vietnam military reforms, the All-Volunteer Force, was rammed down the throats of senior officers. The Nixon

administration instituted the All-Volunteer Force in 1973 because of the rampant unpopularity of the draft, a direct result of the war. Army leaders saw the change for the political expedient it was. They protested that it was based on principles unsuitable for a democracy, striking "at the very heart of the relationship of men in uniform to the society they served." They suspected—rightly, as it turned out—that the politicians would not provide the funds and incentives to make it work, and that it could become a haven for rejects. The other services feared that removal of the threat provided by the draft would cripple their recruiting. Top officers throughout the military predicted that the All-Volunteer Force would fail, further weakening American defenses and endangering the national security.[15]

Such fears seemed borne out in the first years of the experiment. The military tinkered with various incentives to make enlistment attractive—even discussing, before quickly discarding, the radical notion that officers might salute enlisted personnel to show they were there to serve them. It speeded the integration of women, a revolutionary step that became expedient as well as politically correct with the elimination of the draft. As predicted, the embattled Nixon and Carter administrations did not secure the funds to make the volunteer force work, and lingering anti-militarism made recruitment difficult. As late as 1979, what Chief of Staff Gen. Edward "Shy" Meyer called a "hollow army" was 15,000 short of its authorized strength, and the Air Force and Navy endured severe manpower problems. African Americans constituted a disproportionate percentage of the new Army, and critics warned that ghetto youths could be the cannon fodder of the next war. Experts continued to be troubled by the volunteer concept. "What kind of society excuses its most privileged members from defending it?" sociologist Charles Moskos pointedly asked. Recruits continued to be underqualified, and drug and alcohol problems persisted. By the end of the decade, there was much talk of restoring the draft.[16]

A second structural reform was largely the handiwork of Gen. Creighton Abrams, Army Chief of Staff from 1972 to 1974. Like other senior officers, Abrams had been deeply frustrated by President Lyndon Baines Johnson's refusal to mobilize the reserves. As commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam from 1968 to 1972, he had had to deal with the results in terms of a depleted, unskilled, and demoralized army.

As Chief of Staff, Abrams set out to ensure this would not happen again. His essential task was to maintain the Army's fighting strength in the face of pressures to slash the military budget. To stave off further cuts, he made a deal with Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger—the so-called Golden Handshake—to build the Army from thirteen to sixteen divisions without increasing regular forces above 785,000. They did this through a revised force structure that assigned most support functions to the reserves, thus integrating reserves with regulars so closely that it would be impossible to disconnect them. Most significant, from Abrams's standpoint, regulars would not be able to function without the reserves, and thus a future commander in chief would not be able to do what LBJ had done in 1965. "They're not taking us to war again without calling up the reserves," Abrams remarked on numerous occasions.[17]

Abrams's initiative had a huge impact on future mobilizations. By the time of the Persian Gulf War, 70 percent of the Army's support services, 60 percent of the Air Force's strategic airlift units, and 93 percent of the Navy's cargo-handling battalions were with the reserves. A full 100 percent of the Military Traffic Management Command, which managed ports, air bases, and railyards, was with the reserves. President George Bush thus had no choice in 1990 but to call up the reserves and open a national debate on going to war. The subsequent peacekeeping operation in Bosnia also relied heavily on reserve units.[18]

The Vietnam debacle also provoked in the armed services what Col. Harry Summers has called a "renaissance" in military thought.[19] In the post–World War II era, a confident, even compla-

cent American military establishment had all but ignored the study of war. Caught up in the organizational revolution of the 1950s, it focused on raising and managing its forces rather than on how to use them. Facing the uncertainties of a revolutionary new age of nuclear weapons, it left the field of strategic thought to civilian, largely academic theorists, who pioneered such voguish concepts as deterrence, limited war, escalation and coercion, and counter-insurgency.[20]

From the standpoint of Vietnam-era military officers, such theories had proven bankrupt in Vietnam, and in the aftermath they sought to regain control of their own bailiwick and get back to basics. Ironically, the revolution began in the Navy, traditionally the most conservative of the services. As president of the Naval War College, Vice Admiral Stansfield Turner in 1972 introduced into the curriculum a required course on strategy. The course drew heavily on history. To the consternation of some students enrolled in the initial classes, it went all the way back to Thucydides. Along with the focus on strategy came a rediscovery of the German military thinker Carl von Clausewitz, who had articulated the intimate and intricate connections between war and politics; and a shift of emphasis from the science to the art of war.[21]

The "Turner Revolution" swept the armed services in the 1970s. Courses on strategy were introduced at the Air War College and Army War College, and Clausewitz was the man of the hour. All the services rediscovered history and devoted substantial resources to the study of war. In 1979, the Army started a Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth that taught historically oriented courses in the Command and General Staff College and conducted research on issues related to doctrine. The Navy created a Strategic Studies Group in Newport.[22] Thus, while academia in general and the historical profession in particular suffered through a horrendous depression in the 1970s, history was a growth industry in the military.

In the wake of the Vietnam War and in light of the rediscovery

of strategy, the services rewrote their "war-fighting" doctrines, an exercise that provoked often bitter debate about the lessons of Vietnam and how, if at all, they should be applied. Ironically, if not surprisingly, the greatest impact of the Vietnam experience was that it would have very little impact on the actual post-Vietnam doctrine, top officers in all the services generally agreeing that they would not fight that type of war again.

Conflict within the Navy set the tone for the larger debate. In light of the Korean and Vietnam experiences, Zumwalt tried to reconfigure his service for diverse missions. As the top U.S. naval officer in Vietnam, he had demonstrated ingenuity and adaptability in using his forces for the unique problems posed by the war. As CNO, he sought to rebuild the Navy to handle conventional war, limited war, and gunboat diplomacy by constructing what he called "low" ships (as opposed to heavy aircraft carriers) for a variety of different sea control missions. He was defeated by a coalition of powerful forces inside and outside the Navy representing enthusiasts for airpower and submarines. In the 1980s, under the aggressive leadership of secretary John Lehman, the Navy reverted to its traditional absorption with the Soviet threat and set out to build a 600-vessel fleet centered around aircraft carriers. To the post-Zumwalt Navy, Vietnam was irrelevant.[23]

The Army could not cast Vietnam aside so easily, of course, but its major doctrinal thrust was also in other directions. Senior officers recognized that the Army had not been well prepared for fighting in 1965, and after the war they established a Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) to better prepare soldiers for the next conflict, the first time that responsibility for research, training, and doctrine had been placed under a single command. Its first leader was Gen. William DePuy, one of Westmoreland's top assistants when he had headed the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and the architect of the much-maligned search-and-destroy strategy used in Vietnam from 1965 to 1968. Like other military leaders after Vietnam, DePuy naturally—and gladly—turned to

the Soviet threat. The Yom Kippur War of 1973, rather than Vietnam, became the Army's model for the next war.[24]

The doctrine developed under DePuy's guidance focused on conventional warfare in Europe and, in the words of one commentator, "aimed to 'expunge' the bitter experience of Vietnam."[25] Conceding that in the anticipated conflict with Warsaw Pact armies on the plains of Central Europe NATO forces would likely be outnumbered, Field Manual 100–5 of 1976 outlined the new concept of Active Defense, a radical departure from the army's traditional offensive doctrine and piling-on approach, and placed great emphasis on winning the first battle.[26]

These new concepts provoked considerable opposition in the Army, and thus a modified AirLand doctrine, as it evolved in the 1980s, emphasized the coordination of airpower with armor, ground forces, artillery, and even special forces, and the use of new high-tech weaponry to provide the speed, maneuverability, and firepower to enable smaller forces to defeat a larger army. Surprise and mobility were the keys to success. In the spirit of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, the new doctrine called for deep probes, 100 miles or so behind enemy front lines, to find and exploit weak spots.[27]

Postwar Army doctrine moved ever further from Vietnam. Advocates of counterinsurgency and what came to be called low-intensity conflict (LIC) waged a rearguard action against the new conventional wisdom. There was some discussion of the strategic lessons of Vietnam in the Army War College publication *Parameters*, and the 1986 edition of FM 100–5 gave some attention to low-intensity conflict. But another major Army publication, *Military Review*, showed little interest in Vietnam, and the 1986 field manual made only passing reference to it. The Army's semiofficial, neo-Clausewitzian analysis, Col. Summers's *On Strategy* (1981), even wrote insurgency out of that war, arguing that after 1965 the United States faced a conventional threat and should have fought it as such. "Vietnam is such a nasty word in the American vocabulary today," one officer observed in 1980, "that even military men are loath to look back on it for lessons applicable to the future."[28]

The most bitter struggle took place in the Air Force. The youngest of the services, the Air Force was not inclined toward self-criticism or disposed to look searchingly at the Vietnam experience. Discussion of that war in professional military journals during the 1970s was almost nonexistent. Insofar as the leadership dealt with Vietnam, it sought vindication of long-standing beliefs, conveniently concluding that airpower had won the war in 1972 only to have it lost by the politicians. A small group of "Young Turks" tried to challenge that position in the 1980s, examining the role of airpower critically and thoughtfully, but they met stubborn resistance. Some were not promoted. When the *Air University Review* became an organ for the dissidents, it was closed down, ostensibly because it was not read and to save money. Discussion of low-intensity conflict nevertheless persisted in Air Force circles, and a 1992 operational manual stood conventional airpower theory on its ear by emphasizing that because insurgents presented few targets, airpower could best be used in such conflicts to support internal security forces. Such heretical notions never penetrated the top leadership, however, and post–Gulf War doctrine reclaimed the old high ground, insisting that in the new era of the revolution in military affairs (RMA), airpower could be counted upon to play the decisive role by destroying an enemy's ability to control information. This narrow focus on "information dominance," critics warned, might deprive the Air Force of the capacity to deal with less sophisticated enemies, as in Vietnam. "The increased interplay of information systems in war will not negate the fact that war is an intrinsically human enterprise, subject to vagaries of chance, fog, and friction."[29]

The services put great emphasis on improved training in the aftermath of Vietnam—in particular, hands-on, realistic training and rigorous self-criticism. Here again the Navy was the first to act. Alarmed by the heavy losses of aircraft and pilots in missions over North Vietnam, it instituted its much-ballyhooed Top Gun pro-

gram in 1969, a postgraduate course in dogfighting for young pilots. The idea was to recreate as closely as possible the actual combat conditions experienced in Vietnam. New pilots were thus sent up against planes similar to those of the enemy using tactics employed by the enemy. After each training exercise, students went through intensive analysis of what had happened and why. The realistic training paid off immediately in improved performance and lighter losses.[30] The Air Force followed suit with its Red Flag program at Nellis Air Base in Nevada and went further by creating a squadron of "aggressor" aircraft to replicate the enemy, putting pilots under stress comparable to that of actual combat.[31]

The Army opened its National Training Center in the Mojave Desert in 1981. NTC, another product of DePuy's tenure at TRADOC, was a more ambitious replication of Top Gun and Red Flag. A fanatic on training, DePuy established standards for everything from marksmanship to the number of push-ups required for individual soldiers. Like the Navy and Air Force, the Army shifted from static, firing-range-type training to "free-form, force on force tactical engagements." Units were sent to NTC for two weeks' daytime and nighttime training against forces dressed like Soviets, carrying Soviet weapons, and employing Soviet tactics. NTC sought to make the experience as real as possible through battle conditions and live fire. As with the Navy and Air Force, the new training involved a basic change in culture. Shedding the "arrogance of the perennial winner," the post-Vietnam Army deliberately put aside the "can-do" and "zero defects" mentality of the post–World War II years that allowed no room for mistakes in favor of self-criticism and honest assessment of error. "Learning through failure" was the byword for a new era.[32]

The Marine Corps was a special case. With a long tradition of fighting low-intensity wars in tropical areas, the Marines were certain that their pacification strategy could have worked in Vietnam if it had been applied on a broader scale, and they were less disposed than other services to reexamine their experience in that war. In

the rethinking of mission and doctrine that characterized the post-Vietnam era, however, the Marines were also less clear about their role than at any point in the recent past, and there was even talk of eliminating them as a separate service. The truck-bombing of a Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, which killed 249 Americans, left them "reeling."[33]

Under the direction of Secretary of the Navy James Webb, an ex-Marine, and Commandant Al Gray, the Marines went through their own renaissance in the late 1980s. Gray resolved a long-standing debate between advocates of attrition and advocates of maneuver by adapting to Marine doctrine the Army's "fluid, flexible" warfare designed to sweep around enemy strengths and seek out weaknesses. He upgraded Marine training by establishing realistic conditions as in the other services, adding a week of Basic Warrior Training to boot camp and requiring that every Marine, no matter the job, be a rifleman. "We're warriors, and people who support warriors," he proclaimed, "and we must always keep that focus."[34]

Reorganization of the command system—perhaps the most fundamental reform of the post-Vietnam years—was imposed by Congress in 1986 over the opposition of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and much of the Pentagon. It stemmed directly from the abysmal lack of coordination among the services that marred the invasion of Grenada in 1983, but in a much deeper sense it reflected perceived "lessons" of Vietnam. Throughout the Vietnam War, the Joint Chiefs had chafed at their lack of a formal position within the chain of command and their lack of influence with the civilian leadership. Under the JCS system at that time, the chiefs were more representatives of the individual services than independent military advisers to the president, which often resulted in watered-down recommendations that reflected the least common denominator of what they could agree upon. Bitter wrangling between the services in Washington and in the field hampered planning and crippled performance. An incredibly convoluted command system placed the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), a naval officer in Pearl

Harbor, over the entire operation and deprived the field commander, Gen. Westmoreland, of control of air operations over North Vietnam.[35]

The Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, labeled by one authority the "most sweeping military reform legislation in the history of the nation," sought to address these problems.[36] The position of Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, was enhanced by making that individual the principal military adviser to the president and the Secretary of Defense, giving him responsibility for devising strategic plans and budgets, and assigning him a seat on the National Security Council. To improve cooperation among the services, the legislation placed great emphasis on "jointness." The Joint Staff, an advisory body that had previously served the chiefs as a group, was placed directly under the chairman, increased in size, and given greater responsibility. Training for joint service was made mandatory for senior officers, and joint courses were added to the curriculum at the various service schools. Field commanders were given greater authority over the forces under them. The legislation sought nothing less than a "complete organizational revolution."[37]

III

Within ten years after the fall of Saigon, a full-scale military resurgence was under way. Upon taking office in 1981, the administration of Ronald Reagan committed itself to wage the Cold War vigorously and poured billions of dollars into a massive military buildup. Popular attitudes shifted dramatically, most notably in a reawakening of patriotism and a respect for things military. The reforms initiated by the services in the wake of Vietnam began to show dramatic results. "2.1 million uniformed men and women are at home with the nation they serve," *U.S. News & World Report* exulted in 1985, "enjoying an esteem unimaginable a few years ago."[38] Signs of the military rebirth were everywhere. Moribund in 1979,

the All-Volunteer Force was alive and well by the mid-1980s, a result of the Army's slick "Be All That You Can Be" advertising campaign and the pay increases and other incentives provided by the Reagan defense budgets.[39] The payoff was evident in more and better recruits, higher rates of reenlistment, and a better-trained and more proficient Army. As the Army went, so also the other services. The service academies were flooded with applications. Once kicked off numerous college campuses, ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) recovered and in some areas flourished. Popular support for the military grew dramatically. "Today, there's no fear that somebody's going to run up to you and give you hell about being in the army," a retired colonel said with obvious relief.[40] "The United States has shed its post-Vietnam doldrums of doubt, despair, and dissolution," boasted Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage.[41]

Even though the military had rebuilt itself by the mid-1980s, fears of another Vietnam still haunted its leaders. Indeed, nowhere in American society was there greater reluctance to employ force than in the military itself, a clear result of what had come to be called the "Vietnam syndrome." Senior military officers were "seared by the experience of public repudiation by large segments of society."[42] They brought from Vietnam a keen sense of the limits of public tolerance for a protracted war and a profound distrust of civilian leaders, who, many believed, poorly understood the uses of military power and were responsive to all sorts of political pressures that had little to do with the "objective conditions of the battlefield." "Remember one lesson from the Vietnam era," Gen. William Knowlton told Army War College graduates in 1985. "Those who ordered the meal were not there when the waiter brought the check."[43] Many officers also brought from Vietnam a new awareness of the limits of military power in resolving complex political problems such as insurgencies and civil conflicts. "We've thrown over the old 'can-do' idea," a senior officer told *New York Times* military correspondent Drew Middleton. "Now we want to know exactly

what they want us to do and how they think it can be accomplished."[44]

This new attitude was palpable in the 1980s even as America's military machine was being rebuilt. Senior officers vigorously opposed the application of "small doses of force in messy waters for obscure political purposes." They opposed committing troops to vaguely defined missions such as the 1983 peacekeeping operation in Lebanon. They opposed sending anything more than small advisory units to the raging civil conflicts in Central America, and worried that even these small commitments might put the United States on a slippery slope toward full-scale intervention as in Vietnam.[45]

The military's post-Vietnam fears were articulated in late 1984 by Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. The so-called Weinberger doctrine was an immediate reaction to the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon and also to the persistent advocacy by Secretary of State George Shultz and Reagan's National Security Council of committing small increments of forces to what Weinberger dismissed as "ever more wild adventures."[46] But the secretary later conceded that his views had been primarily shaped by the "terrible mistake" of committing troops in Vietnam without ensuring popular support and providing them the means to win. In the summer of 1984, Weinberger thus framed a set of rules for "the uses of military power." Troops would be committed only as a last resort and only if it was plainly in the national interest. Objectives must be clearly defined and attainable. Public support must be assured, and the means provided to ensure victory.[47]

Weinberger's initiative provoked a "bloody fight" within the Reagan administration. Critical journalists dismissed his rules as "the Capgun Doctrine" and the "doctrine of only-fun-wars"; Shultz later labeled them the "Vietnam syndrome in spades."[48] The "doctrine" was never given official sanction, but top military officers such as future Joint Chiefs chairman Colin Powell, while conceding the dangers of stating such rules publicly and explicitly, accepted them in principle. "Clausewitz would have applauded," Powell later wrote. "And in the future when it became my responsibility to advise presidents on committing our forces to combat, Weinberger's rules turned out to be a practical guide." They became the rules under which the Persian Gulf War was fought.[49]

IV

Indeed, in many ways, the Persian Gulf War at times seemed for the military (and for the rest of American society) more about Vietnam than about Kuwait, oil, and Iraq. Those officers and noncoms who had experienced the agony of Vietnam saw the Gulf War as an opportunity for redemption. Much like an athlete preparing for a championship match, they felt special pressures as they awaited battle. "Years later, going into Desert Storm," a senior naval officer recalled, "the common theme among all leaders who had been involved in Vietnam was, 'We want to do this one right.'" An Air Force Chief Warrant Officer agreed: "I kept thinking Vietnam. . . . This time we're going to prove we can really win."[50]

From beginning to end, in every conceivable way, the military and the civilian leadership consciously set out to avoid the mistakes they believed had been made in Vietnam. As a result of the Abrams reforms, the reserves had to be mobilized at the outset of the crisis, binding the nation to the war in a way it had not been bound in Vietnam. Following the Weinberger "rules" to the letter, President George Bush carefully cultivated public support and secured a vote of endorsement from Congress before launching military action against Iraq.

In method and result, military planning was distinctly different from that in the Vietnam War. Although the civilian leadership had to push the military relentlessly to launch the ground offensive, Bush was generally content to leave military planning in the hands of the field commander, and he went to great lengths to avoid the appearance of micromanagement from Washington that had be-

come identified with Lyndon Johnson. He repeatedly insisted that "this would not be another Vietnam." American troops would not fight with one hand tied behind their back. There would be no gradualism or conceded sanctuary. "Once you're committed to war," Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf observed, "be ferocious enough to do whatever is necessary to get it over with as quickly as possible."[51] Even the original name assigned to the air campaign—INSTANT THUNDER—highlighted the differences from its discredited Vietnam-era predecessor. In contrast to Vietnam, where an overconfident military had initially dismissed the enemy, the Iraqi army was portrayed as ten feet tall, although knowledgeable officials knew better. Gens. Powell and Schwarzkopf refused to be pushed into war until they had massed absolutely overwhelming force to apply against the enemy.

The command system worked differently. Schwarzkopf and his commanders carefully avoided what they saw as the mistakes of Vietnam: "giving cavalier promises and 'sugarcoating the truth' . . . to please the commander in chief."[52] Rather than do this, officers were prepared to contemplate resignation, something they had concluded their predecessors should have done in Vietnam. As a result of Goldwater-Nichols, Schwarzkopf had much greater control of the forces in the Gulf than Westmoreland had had in Vietnam. His commanders had to listen to him rather than to their respective services.[53]

Certain that a hostile media had contributed to failure in Vietnam and concluding that war was too important to be left to the journalists, the military, with the cooperation of civilian authorities, muzzled the press. Access to the battlefield was strictly limited. All dispatches had to be submitted to military censors in Washington and in the field. To hide from the public the cost of the war, the military even restricted coverage of the return to the United States of the bodies of those killed in action. "It's okay to die for your country," the columnist James McCartney acidly observed. "The Pentagon just doesn't want anyone to know about it."[54]

The nation's smashing and stunningly easy victory in the Persian Gulf War seemed for many Americans—military and civilian—a long-awaited vindication. "After the ambiguity and humiliation of Vietnam," observed Gerald Linderman of the University of Michigan, "the gulf war seems a model of clarity and success, a war portrayed as being fought with the most efficient weapons and greatest resolve against the vilest of villains."[55] "We've closed the door on Vietnam," one officer proclaimed. "We've done it. The circle is complete."[56]

V

The Gulf War in fact helped erase bad memories of Vietnam for the military and for civilians and restored the prestige and self-respect of the armed forces. The performance of the U.S. military in the Gulf War seemed to vindicate the reforms instituted in the 1970s and 1980s. Many writers have thus concluded that the services learned from their earlier failure and that their constructive response to the Vietnam debacle was the key to rebuilding an efficient, devastatingly effective modern war-making machine and to success in the Gulf.[57]

The legacy of America's longest and most divisive war is far more complex and far-reaching than that, however. A deep residue of suspicion about civilian leadership still lingers from Vietnam. It has, together with the end of the Cold War and the removal of the Soviet threat, the emergence of a strange new world of peacekeeping missions in distant areas, and fundamental changes in the way forces are raised and used, created a widening gap between the military and society that has possibly huge implications for U.S. foreign policy and civil-military relations in the twenty-first century.

The Gulf War's apparent vindication of post-Vietnam military doctrine, for example, could turn out to be counterproductive. That war, to reverse Gen. Omar Bradley's famous statement about expanding the Korean War, was the right war in the right place at the

right time against the right enemy. It was the perfect war for forces trained to do battle with the Soviets on the plains of eastern Europe; the desert was the perfect killing field for the military's new doctrines of mobile warfare.

The Gulf War thus powerfully reinforced the military's post-Vietnam focus on conventional, high-tech war. Current Air Force doctrine is entirely conventional. The Army is now experiencing something of an identity crisis, unsure whether to remake itself into a peacekeeping force or continue to focus on conventional warfare, twenty-first-century style. Its most recent manual has a chapter titled "Operations Other than War," but still heavily emphasizes high-tech, mobile war in the mode of Desert Storm. Outside of the Marine Corps, with its tradition of fighting small wars and its current boast to be the nation's "911 force," the services are left with a "structure, doctrine and attitude that are still not conducive to involvement in low intensity conflict."[58] Despite all the recent hype about a revolution in military affairs, this type of war may be the most likely contingency in a new and as yet quite uncertain era. The military may thus find itself—in part as a result of its abiding determination to avoid anything resembling Vietnam—unprepared for or irrelevant to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Prevailing notions about the role of the press in wartime, also deeply influenced by the Vietnam experience, must be addressed as well. In light of recent trends in journalism, few would argue for unlimited press coverage of combat operations, and the technology of modern journalism will create far more difficult problems for the military in future wars. This said, the notion that the press lost the war in Vietnam remains, especially among military people, one of the most persistent and pernicious of the many myths of that war. The sort of censorship that was applied in the Gulf War—a legacy of Vietnam—probably could not have survived the pressures of a protracted war. Some means must be found in future wars to reconcile the legitimate concerns of national security with the public's need and right to know.[59]

The Goldwater-Nichols reforms produced an improved command system for the Gulf War and at least slightly improved cooperation among the services, but they may also have helped bring to the surface a long-simmering "hidden crisis" in civil-military relations and raised at least a potential threat to civilian control of the military. In a provocative and highly controversial article published in 1994, historian Richard Kohn warned that Gen. Colin Powell had taken advantage of Goldwater-Nichols, the force of his own personality, and the weakness of the civilian leadership to become "the most formidable military figure in this country in two generations." And he used that power in ways that Kohn found disturbing. It was Powell, not his civilian superiors, who devised the military force structure for the post–Cold War era, and Powell whose role in the Gulf War far exceeded even that envisioned for the post-reform Chairman, JCS. When the Clinton administration in its early days proposed easing the ban against homosexuals' serving in the military, Powell and the JCS undermined the proposals rather than implement them, thus, in effect, usurping choices that should have been made by civilians.[60]

Critics have further warned that the often decisive role played by the military in recent years in determining when, where, and how troops would be used abroad endangers the principle of civilian control. Among top military leaders, the Vietnam syndrome persisted past the Gulf War, and the Weinberger doctrine continued to provide their operating principles. In Vietnam, Powell has written, "the top leadership never went to the secretary of defense or the president and said, 'This war is unwinnable the way we are fighting it.' Many of my generation . . . vowed that when our time came to call the shots we would not quietly acquiesce in half-hearted warfare for half-baked reasons that the American people could not understand or support."[61]

In the 1990s, military leaders steadfastly opposed commitment of forces in such places as Haiti and the former Yugoslavia, in effect rejecting missions that did not suit their preferences and priorities.

In 1992, Powell *publicly* opposed U.S. intervention in war-torn Bosnia because, he said, a decisive victory was not attainable. Claiming that the military had learned the "proper lessons of history," an obvious allusion to Vietnam and a claim to superior wisdom that he and his colleagues did not, in fact, possess, he went on to pronounce that "as soon as they tell me it is limited, it means they do not care whether you achieve a result or not. As soon as they tell me 'surgical,' I head for the bushes." By acting in this fashion, historian Russell Weigley has warned, Powell overstepped his bounds, blatantly intruding in the political process and advancing a political position that was not properly his to take.[62]

When the United States did commit troops to Bosnia in 1995, a military still obsessed with "mission security" and avoidance of casualties dictated the terms. The military's paranoia about a "fuzzy mission" led to rules of engagement that sharply restricted the use of American forces, preventing them from pursuing war criminals or assisting the relocation of refugees and thus limiting their ability to implement the Dayton Accords. Their insistence on an "exit strategy" led to the imposition of an unrealistic (and later scrapped) twelve-month deadline for the removal of U.S. troops. Whether the military leaders' concerns about the dangers of intervention are right or wrong is not the issue here. In fact, in both Haiti and Bosnia, they appear to have grossly overestimated the potential casualties. The point is, rather, that they have increasingly dictated for their own reasons decisions that should properly be made by civilians on the basis of political considerations. Critics such as Kohn and Weigley thus see a dangerous reversal of the old Clausewitzian dictum, warning that political decisions are being made on essentially military grounds.[63] The increasing difficulty of getting a semiautonomous military to do civilian bidding is, in the eyes of some defense experts, at least "worrisome."[64]

In the Gulf War, the All-Volunteer Force and the Abrams reforms—perhaps the most important legacies of Vietnam—seem to

have proven their value. Defense analyst Jeffrey Record has speculated, however, that had the Gulf War lasted longer than a year and the rotation of large numbers of troops been required, the United States might not have been able to replace its frontline troops with a skilled force adequate to sustain a long war. Record has further observed that the questionable performance of some ill-prepared National Guard and reserve units points up basic weaknesses in the system that, if not corrected, could cause major problems in a longer war with a competitive foe. The Abrams reforms have hamstrung mobilization for the Bosnia operation. As that mission extended far beyond the original deadline and Army officials were compelled to call up more and more reservists, they began to wonder how long civilians would put up with being taken away from families and careers for hazardous, low-paying jobs in remote countries.[65]

In the post–Cold War era, the future of the volunteer system appears at best murky. No doubt it was one of the success stories of the 1980s. It seems evident that volunteers perform better than draftees, and raising troops through a volunteer system may be more equitable than the post–World War II draft. Reinstitution of the draft might also deny minorities opportunities they have had under the existing system, and forcing people to serve against their will damages cohesion. In any event, return of the draft in any foreseeable circumstance is doubtful. It remains to be seen, however, whether volunteer forces can be recruited and sustained at a high level of proficiency in an era with a robust civilian economy, when the military's mission seems increasingly unclear and when downsizing and budget-cutting may eliminate or reduce some of the incentives. Long hours in training and frequent tours of duty abroad have also taken their toll. The number of young males enlisting has declined since 1989. The Army failed to meet its recruitment quotas in 1997, and the Navy in early 1999 faced a shortfall of 7,000 recruits and had 22,000 empty billets in the fleet. Both the Navy

and Air Force have had great difficulty recruiting pilots. For the first time in years, there was talk of a possible return to the draft and, more likely, a lowering of standards for recruits.[66]

As critics have pointed out from the beginning, a volunteer military force poses even more fundamental problems in terms of the place of the military in American society. In what turned out to be her farewell speech (she was forced to resign for allegedly derogatory remarks about the Marines in the same speech), former Assistant Secretary of the Army Sara Lister warned in late 1997 of a "widening cultural gap between our armed services and the rest of us." As a result of the volunteer system and the end of the Cold War, most Americans no longer serve in the armed forces or even know people in the military. They are largely indifferent to things military. With few exceptions, the civilians now making decisions have no military background. Who has more military experience than Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and Phil Gramm combined? goes a recent joke that sounds suspiciously of military origin. The answer is Shannon Faulkner, the woman who spent several well-publicized days at The Citadel in 1996 before dropping out.[67]

The military, on the other hand, increasingly stands apart from society as a whole. Without the draft, few upper- or upper-middle-class Americans now serve in the armed forces, and college graduates in enlisted ranks are rare. A growing demand for technological skills has also led the military to shut its doors to those from poor backgrounds. The armed services thus now include neither elites nor the poor, and they are less representative of society at large. They have become increasingly professionalized. They are also politically more conservative today than in the recent past, and they have become more partisan and more openly politicized. One survey suggests that two-thirds of the officer corps voted Republican in 1996, compared to less than one-third in 1976. Isolated on ships or on remote bases, mostly in the West and South and away from metropolitan coastal elites, members of the military live by a set of shared values and operate according to a code of beliefs and behavior different from that of their civilian counterparts. They view themselves as standing above the selfish, fragmented, and undisciplined civilian society they are pledged to defend and for which many have a certain contempt. Journalist Thomas Ricks has recently described the Marine Corps as a "military subculture within a military subculture that is becoming increasingly disdainful of civilian society."[68]

This widening gap has unsettling, if as yet unclear, implications. Civilian leaders have at best a poor understanding of military concerns and military issues. As part of its "Vietnam hangover," on the other hand, the military retains deep-seated suspicions about a civilian leadership that allegedly betrayed it before and might do so again, suspicions that are being passed down to the post-Vietnam generation. "The U.S. military is now more alienated from its civilian leadership than at any time in American history, and more vocal about it," Kohn warned in 1994. "The next war we fight is likely to be on American soil," writers in the *Marine Gazette* predicted, referring to a war against the chaos that characterizes the society at large. Kohn contends that the danger of a coup is "virtually nil" and that the problems in civil-military relations will probably work themselves out, as in the past. But he and others suggest that, at a minimum, active steps should be taken to restore civilian control, rebuild the diversity of the officer corps, and promote greater trust and mutual respect between civilians and the military.[69]

The legacy of Vietnam for the military has thus been enormous. The immediate impact was devastating: the destruction and demoralization of a once-proud and seemingly invincible machine. Precisely because of this, the military in some ways faced up to a war most Americans preferred to sweep under the rug, healing itself, enthusiastically and energetically embracing *institutional* changes that transformed its basic culture, and putting together a high-tech machine that performed with deadly efficiency in the Persian Gulf War.

This represents only a part of the story, however. While adapting

its institutions, the military has been less successful in adjusting intellectually and emotionally to the trauma of Vietnam. There has been a marked reluctance on its part to accept a share of responsibility for the nation's failure. The tendency, rather, has been to blame a weak-kneed civilian leadership or a lack of public will. The Museum of Military History at the Marine base at Parris Island, South Carolina, for example, teaches that "American forces, though never defeated in battle, were removed from war by a wavering government and a divided populace"—a conviction, Thomas Ricks adds, that is "gospel throughout the Corps."[70] Such views have made it difficult for all the services to reevaluate their strategy and tactics in Vietnam, to analyze the peculiar demands of low-intensity conflict, and to develop doctrines appropriate for what could be the dominant form of conflict in the twenty-first century. The legacy of deep suspicion bequeathed by Vietnam has left the military reluctant to employ forces abroad except under the most favorable circumstances and has pushed its top officers to intrude into the political decision-making process in ways in which they have not done before. Such suspicion has contributed, along with other changes resulting from Vietnam, to a widening gap between the military and society that has possibly serious implications for the future. The impact of Vietnam thus has persisted well beyond the Persian Gulf War, and may last long beyond the careers of the people who fought in Southeast Asia.