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Vietnam: A Winnable War?

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In late 1966, Australia's military intervention in the Vietnam War reached a watershed. As soldiers of the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) completed the first six months of their deployment to South Vietnam, their commanders took stock. During a brief lull in the tempo of operations, Captain Robert O'Neill, intelligence officer with the 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (5RAR), prepared a paper at the request of his commanding officer. He examined the operational experiences of the battalion during the previous six months in Phuoc Tuy province and assessed the likely effectiveness of alternative approaches to operations in the future.²

In his rigorous analysis, Captain O'Neill made a number of observations, forecasts, and conclusions, many of which would prove prescient. 'The final outcome of this war', he wrote, 'will be determined by the feelings of the Vietnamese people. No purely military victory, however overwhelming, can provide a permanent solution unless the victory is won by the side whom the people favour.' Time was also a crucial factor, he noted, and clearly was on the side of the communist forces, not the

1 On behalf of my late colleague, Dr Ian McNeill, joint author of the volumes of official history of Australian Army ground operations in Vietnam, I acknowledge our debt to the scholarship, counsel, and inspiration of Professor Robert J. O'Neill, whose outstanding work has illuminated understanding of the Vietnam War and its complexities for a generation of historians.

2 O'Neill, Robert J. (1968) *Vietnam Task: The 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, 1966–67*, Sydney: Cassell, chapter 13.

United States and its allies. In a protracted war with little indication of a conclusive outcome, mounting casualties would inevitably erode domestic political support, and lead to war weariness and dissent among home front populations. Above all, O'Neill concluded: 'Control over the villages is the key to the war.' He conceded the necessity of conventional operations aimed at eliminating Viet Cong main force units, or at least restricting them to areas far from the centres of population. But the Vietnamese village, he maintained, 'is the closest equivalent to a front line in this war', and 'without victory in the villages the war can drag on'.³

These were mature and astute assessments by the 30-year-old army captain. They were based on his personal observations and experiences on operations, and informed by his military and academic training. In one of his first appointments after graduating from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in 1958, O'Neill worked as assistant to Colonel F. P. Serong, then Chief of Staff at Southern Command Headquarters in Melbourne. 'Ted' Serong had acquired a legendary reputation as an authority on counter-insurgency, and his ideas made an impression on the young officer, who would continue to develop his own thinking on approaches to the war as his career developed and the conflict in Vietnam evolved. After completing an engineering degree at the University of Melbourne, O'Neill continued his studies at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar in 1961. He returned to Australia in 1965 with a doctorate in modern history for his thesis on the changing relationship between the German Army and the Nazi Party prior to the Second World War.⁴

In May 1966, he commenced a 12-month tour of duty in Vietnam. Serving initially as second-in-command of a rifle company of 5RAR, in August he was appointed intelligence officer and took over the intelligence section on battalion headquarters. This role involved him in the planning and command of operations. It also demanded, in addition to his knowledge and experience as a soldier, the application of his scholarly skills of research in gathering information from multiple sources, and analysis and interpretation to compile

3 O'Neill, Captain R. J. (1967) Memorandum: 'An analysis of the operational experience of 5RAR in Vietnam, May-Dec 1966', 5RAR, Ap An Phu, South Vietnam, 4 January 1967, paragraphs 2, 6-9, 11, 25, 26, personal papers of Robert J. O'Neill, OW90/4, Box 2, Australian War Memorial (hereafter AWM); copy in Official Historian's Collection, E/2/18, AWM 257.

4 O'Neill, Robert (1966) *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933-1939*, London: Cassell.

authoritative dossiers on the composition, activities, command structures, and probable plans and movements of the communist forces in the task force area of responsibility. The enemy formations present at that time comprised two strong Viet Cong main force regiments, a mobile Viet Cong provincial battalion, and local district guerrilla units, totalling over 5,000 troops and outnumbering the Australian Task Force of some 4,000 men. O'Neill's work was vital for the success of operations and required a deep understanding of the local situation. He became a keen observer with genuine empathy for the problems of the local South Vietnamese people, and an interest in their social and political structures, culture and economy, and military and civilian leaders. Most importantly for posterity, he recorded and published his impressions.

In early 1967, as he delivered his formal army memorandum analysing battalion operations, O'Neill also published — apparently without censorship or reproach by senior military authorities — a frank and enlightening article in the Australian journal *Quadrant*. He recounted the pattern of Australian military interactions with the local people of three typical Vietnamese villages over the previous six months, as the task force strove to force the Viet Cong away from the populated areas and assisted in the restoration of security and government control. He vividly described the dilemmas of the villagers, caught in a web of their own apathy and distrust, and stranded between the harsh realities of intimidation and the brutal exercise of terror by Viet Cong guerrillas, the anti-government propaganda and activism of local cadres, and forced recruitment, taxation, and persuasion through 're-education' by hard-core communist sympathisers. Amid this constant turbulence, Australian clashes with enemy units — including 6RAR's publicised victory in August at the battle of Long Tan — and the limited successes of various civil aid projects offered little more to the people than the promises of the remote government regime in Saigon. In his guardedly optimistic evaluation of the impact of the task force presence on the local population and the continuing war in Phuoc Tuy, O'Neill maintained that support for the people should be the primary focus of military intervention: 'the essence of victory in Vietnam', he wrote, 'is the battle for the hearts and minds of the millions of peasants who make up the country'.⁵

5 O'Neill, Robert (1967) 'Three Villages of Phuoc Tuy', *Quadrant* 11(1), pp. 4–10.

While on active service in Vietnam, O'Neill also compiled a comprehensive chronicle and commentary on the war. As a battalion intelligence officer, he was daily engaged in arduous and sometimes dangerous work. He was mentioned in despatches for 'his skill and industry in collecting and interpreting' intelligence sources while displaying 'high personal courage in seeking out and confirming information both by ground and air reconnaissance'.⁶ Yet he somehow found the time and energy, often working from late at night into the early hours of the following day, to write regular, detailed accounts of the daily activities on operations of his infantry battalion and its 800 soldiers. These informal despatches he mailed home every few days to his wife, Sally, who typed and filed copies. During his leave on return from Vietnam, O'Neill wove them into an invaluable record of an Australian battalion at war. It was published in 1968 as *Vietnam Task*, a book that remains a seminal work as one of the first Australian unit histories from Vietnam and for its unique perspective as a soldier's personal account. In this and subsequent writings on Vietnam, Robert O'Neill was to pave the way for a generation of Vietnam War scholars by providing valuable observations, insights, and inspiration for later researchers.⁷

The war Captain O'Neill encountered on his arrival in South Vietnam in May 1966 had already become a focus of world attention. The conflict had increased in intensity since 1961, when the communist National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF), supported and directed by the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam, began an armed insurrection aimed at destabilising and overthrowing the shaky government of the Republic of (South) Vietnam.

As Cold War tensions increased during the 1960s, the conflict in Vietnam assumed a disproportionate strategic significance. Vietnam became the focal point for a supreme struggle between the communist

6 Citation for Captain R. J. O'Neill, recommendation for Mention in Despatches (MID), 10 January 1967, Governor-General's file 5/5/29, CRS A2880, National Archives of Australia (NAA).

7 See numerous index references to Robert O'Neill in the three volumes on army operations of the nine-volume series, *The Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1975*: McNeill, Ian (1993) *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950–1966*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial; McNeill, Ian and Ashley Ekins (2003) *On the Offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War 1967–1968*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial; Ekins, Ashley with Ian McNeill (2012) *Fighting to the Finish: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War, 1968–1975*, Sydney Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial.

bloc, and the United States and allied nations. The Hanoi leadership and their communist allies proclaimed their struggle to unify Vietnam under communist rule as part of an inevitable global transition from capitalism to communism, and a test case for the international solidarity of 'true communism'. Leaders in Washington promoted the war as a test case in the 'Free World's' struggle against communist wars of national liberation and as part of America's wider mission of containment of communism.

The commitment of Australian military forces to Vietnam was a process of gradual escalation against the backdrop of Cold War concerns over regional security and communist expansion. The Australian Government's rationale for the commitment embraced two objectives. Firstly, the government claimed, it sent forces to help support the emergence of an independent state in South Vietnam as a barrier to communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Versions of the domino theory were invoked, although the tenet that the survival of an independent Vietnam was crucial to Australia's strategic security was widely challenged. A second objective, arising from the first, was to remove the threat of oppression and terror which was believed to be the destiny of the 15 million people of South Vietnam if they fell under communist domination from the North. These aims were consistent with the strategy of forward defence, the cornerstone of Australian defence planning in the 1960s and a concept which meshed with the American strategy of containment of communism in Southeast Asia.

By supporting the United States in Vietnam, Australia also sought both to maintain an American presence in Asia and to secure a guarantee of American assistance in the event of Australia's own security being in jeopardy. A Defence Committee Report of the time considered it 'vital to Australia's strategic interests to have a strong United States military presence in South East Asia [and] to show a willingness to assist the United States to achieve her aims in South Vietnam'.⁸

In 1962, Australia made its first military commitment to Vietnam by deploying a team of 30 military advisers to assist in training South Vietnamese forces. By 1965, this team had expanded to 100 soldiers, working within a huge American advisory structure of some 16,000

8 Defence Committee Report, 'Further military assistance to South Vietnam', 6 April 1965, p. 4, para. 10, attached to DCA No. 13/1965, 6 April 1965, DMO&P file 161/A/3, AWM 121.

advisers. But it was becoming apparent that the communist insurgency in South Vietnam could not be stemmed solely with advisory and training assistance. The Viet Cong were continuing to grow in support and strength, and the tide of the war was turning against the South. In March 1965, the US began to escalate American military involvement through the first commitment of combat troops and the commencement of a massive aerial bombing campaign of North Vietnam. In late April, following America's lead, the Australian Government committed the first Australian combat troops to South Vietnam.

At each stage of involvement in the war, Australia's military commitment to Vietnam shadowed that of the United States. The first battalion of Australian ground combat forces entered the war in tandem with American forces and was integrated within an American brigade. Australian combat forces were progressively built up to maintain pace with the massive increase in American forces; both reached their peak in 1969. By late 1970 a wind-down and withdrawal of American forces was underway, with Australia awkwardly attempting to keep pace through a parallel wind-down, and the withdrawal of all forces was finally completed by mid-1973.

Australia's commitment, although substantial in terms of its military capabilities, was minuscule in comparison with the military contribution of the United States. Over three million Americans served in the war and the total number of American personnel in Vietnam reached a peak of over 542,000. Some 60,000 Australians served in the war, and at its peak strength of over 8,300 personnel in mid-1969, the Australian force in Vietnam comprised elements from all three services: an army task force of three infantry battalions with combat and logistic support, along with a separate army advisory team; air force helicopters, medium bombers, and transport aircraft; and navy support vessels, guided missile destroyers, and helicopters. For Australia, however, Vietnam was predominantly a ground war. The Australian Army conducted 85 per cent of operations and did most of the fighting — and most of the dying: soldiers suffered 96 per cent of Australian fatal casualties in Vietnam. Moreover, the nature and intensity of operations in Vietnam placed Australian soldiers into longer periods of contact, or imminent risk of contact, with the enemy than perhaps any time since the Gallipoli campaign of 1915.

As a minor partner in a large coalition force, Australia could exert little influence over the higher strategic direction of the war or the strategy employed in Vietnam. As in previous major conflicts, Australian ground forces came under operational control of an allied field commander. In making what amounted to an unqualified and open-ended commitment of combat forces in 1965, the Australian Government and its advisers forfeited their opportunity to negotiate wider war aims with those in the United States directing the war effort. They failed to evaluate the risks inherent in military involvement, and to assess the likelihood of victory or defeat. As historian Ian McNeill later wrote: 'The lack of a defined, clear aim at the highest level, or an agreed notion of what constituted success, prevented the adoption of a coherent strategy and bedevilled the whole conduct of the war.'⁹

Over time, it would become clear that the Americans too had not adequately considered and resolved many of these issues. Former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara later admitted that he and other defence advisers failed to ask the 'most basic questions' before deciding to commit troops. Would the fall of South Vietnam trigger the fall of all Southeast Asia? Would that constitute a grave threat to the West's security? What kind of war — conventional or guerrilla — was likely to develop, and could US troops win it, fighting alongside the South Vietnamese?¹⁰ The latter unresolved questions, in particular, were to prove crucial to the tactical approaches adopted by Australian forces and their joint involvement in operations with American forces.

In May 1965, the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) and support forces, totalling 1,100 men, arrived in Vietnam and were placed under American operational command, joining the elite US 173rd Airborne Brigade as its third battalion. Initially confined to protecting the large American air base at Bien Hoa, 25 kilometres north east of Saigon, the battalion's role was later extended to include offensive operations in nearby regions dominated by the Viet Cong. The Australian unit performed outstandingly with the American brigade, notably during Operation Crimp in the Iron Triangle,

9 McNeill, Ian (1993) *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950–1966*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, pp. 64–5; Ekins, Ashley with Ian McNeill (2012) *Fighting to the Finish: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War, 1968–1975*, Sydney Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, p. 691.

10 McNamara, Robert S. (1996) *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, New York: Vintage Books, p. 39.

breaching the vast Cu Chi tunnel network and discovering an important Viet Cong headquarters complex. However, Australian soldiers soon found themselves at odds with the very different American doctrine and tactical principles.

The Australians had come to Vietnam through their experience of counter-insurgency warfare in Malaya and Borneo, and training in low level, counter-insurgency warfare techniques. Their methods involved pacification, the restoration of government control, separating insurgents from the population, searching, patrolling, and ambushing, all concepts emphasising patience and stealth.

The Americans intended to fight a very different war. They had come to Vietnam through North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) preparations for land warfare in Europe, and their experience in Korea. They favoured the direct approach, in which they could bring their numbers, mobility, and firepower to bear in order to kill large numbers of the enemy. The search and destroy operation evolved as the principal tactic of American ground forces, and body counts became the measure of success. In 1965, this strategy was probably the only way in which an impending communist victory could be thwarted in Vietnam. But the American attrition warfare approach often randomly destroyed Vietnamese lives and property, giving rise to the new military euphemism — ‘collateral damage’ — and alienating Vietnamese support. This approach also involved US willingness to risk high casualties to their own forces. Australian senior commanders firmly resisted American overtures to deploy the single Australian battalion on hazardous operations with an American mobile reserve force.

In mid-1966, as 1RAR’s tour ended, the Australian commitment was expanded to an independent task force of two battalions with combat and logistic support. The increase in Australian ground forces was made primarily for diplomatic and strategic reasons, to meet American expectations, but it also had a sound military basis. Although the task force was still under American operational control, this arrangement enabled the Australians to operate more independently and to practise their own doctrine of counter-insurgency operations. The 1ATF established its base at Nui Dat, in the heart of the southern province of Phuoc Tuy, and quickly made impressive gains. By the end of 1966,

as Robert O'Neill observed, the Australians were expanding their area of operations and consolidating government control over areas of the province.¹¹

Throughout 1967, however, the limitations of the two-battalion task force became increasingly apparent. Despite the pressing need for tanks and a third infantry battalion, it took over 15 months before the government decided to commit the required forces — and then the decision was made, not on the basis of military necessity, but with a view to its impact upon the American alliance. It took a further three to five months before the third battalion and tanks finally arrived in Vietnam and joined the task force.

In the meantime, the under-strength Australian force struggled, with its limited manpower and combat resources, to pursue the elusive and aggressive Viet Cong forces which outnumbered the Australians in Phuoc Tuy province. For the want of tanks, in particular, numbers of Australian soldiers were killed and wounded during assaults against enemy bunkers and on operations around the Viet Cong stronghold in the Long Hai hills.

The lack of a third manoeuvre battalion and tanks mirrored wider weaknesses in the Australian force structure in Vietnam. This was to be a recurring problem throughout the Australian commitment. After years of neglect, the Australian Army was depleted in numbers and plagued by shortages of weapons and equipment; it lacked flexibility and was over-stretched in meeting its obligations under the government's strategic policy of forward defence. To compensate for manpower shortages, the task force included soldiers conscripted under the National Service Scheme introduced in late 1964. Over the course of the war, almost 64,000 20-year-old males were called up by a selective ballot system and enlisted in the army; over 15,000 of them served in Vietnam. The issue of conscription for Vietnam would become a principal source of dissent and opposition to the war, and a political millstone for the government, particularly as Australian casualties mounted.

11 O'Neill, Robert J. (1968) *Vietnam Task: The 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, 1966–67*, Sydney: Cassell, chapters 13 and 17.

To compensate for the limitations of his under-strength force, one task force commander attempted an innovative approach. In mid-1967, the task force laid a 12-kilometre-long barrier minefield to deny the Viet Cong access to the populated area in the southeast of the province, and to separate the guerrillas from their popular bases in the villages. The minefield contained some 21,000 anti-personnel mines; but it was not adequately secured by both Australian and South Vietnamese forces. Before long, the Viet Cong learned to remove large numbers of the mines and re-laid them, with disastrous effects on Australian patrols.

By mid-1969, the enemy mine campaign had produced the heaviest Australian casualties of the war, and the barrier minefield was widely viewed as the biggest blunder of the war. The enemy-laid mines inflicted an average of six Australian casualties per mine, with peaks of up to 18 casualties from a single mine incident. Occasionally, so many soldiers of a platoon were killed or wounded that the entire platoon became ineffective, forcing the curtailing of operations.

In early 1968, the task force increased in size and effectiveness with the addition of a third manoeuvre battalion and a tank squadron, becoming in the process a more balanced, brigade-sized force with enhanced flexibility and firepower. These additions were timely, coming just prior to the communist Tet Offensive. The tanks proved to be the decisive factor in several heavy enemy engagements. But the continuing limitations of the task force, even at its peak with three infantry battalions, armour, and other support elements, made it extremely difficult for commanders to mount protracted operations in depth into remote, enemy-held base areas without substantial US Army armour, artillery, air, and logistical support.

In response to the continuously changing nature and intensity of the war, successive task force commanders evolved their own concepts of operations and approaches to the war. But all faced the same operational dilemma: the requirement to simultaneously conduct conventional operations in depth to destroy the enemy's main forces, while also conducting pacification operations around the populated centres. The former involved the task force in operations in the remote, enemy-dominated areas of the province. Several commanders took the view that this was the most effective use of the task force. On the counter side, by keeping the enemy main forces at bay and on

the move through operations in depth, the task force risked falling into an enemy strategic trap, as the communists could effectively use their main forces to keep the Australian troops occupied and far away from the unprotected villages, which were the real target for both sides.

The task force was required to conduct pacification and reconstruction operations to eliminate the influence of communist local forces, cadres, and infrastructure in the towns and villages. But it lacked the manpower, resources, and time to maintain a continuous presence in the pacified areas. Once it moved on, the Viet Cong quickly returned, and the communist infrastructure remained intact.

Many nevertheless believed the war in the villages was the main role for the task force and was of much greater importance than operations to pursue the enemy main forces. O'Neill was one such advocate. The 12-month experience of his battalion, he wrote in April 1969, had reinforced many of the lessons for conducting counter-insurgency warfare. He and many of his fellow officers were convinced that 'the solution to the Vietnam crisis lay in the villages rather than in the jungles', although there remained a need for Australian forces to pursue and defeat the communist main forces who were the enforcing arm of the North Vietnamese government in subjugating the South.

'But these actions will not win the war for either side', O'Neill wrote, 'they will simply help to prevent the winner from losing'.¹² With these words, he echoed the much quoted statement by US National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger: 'the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win.' Kissinger's full statement gives the aphorism its context:

We fought a military war; our opponents fought a political one. We sought physical attrition; our opponents aimed for our psychological exhaustion. In the process we lost sight of one of the cardinal maxims of guerrilla war: the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win. The North Vietnamese used their armed forces the way a bull-fighter uses his cape — to keep us lunging in areas of marginal political importance.¹³

12 O'Neill, Robert (1969) 'Australian Military Problems in Vietnam', *Australian Outlook* 23(1), pp. 46–57; O'Neill, Robert J. (1968) *Vietnam Task*, p. 247.

13 Kissinger, Henry (1969) 'The Vietnam Negotiations', *Foreign Affairs* 48(2), p. 214.

By mid-1970, the influence of the communist forces was waning. Main roads had been opened, markets and trade were flourishing, local government in villages was more effective, and civic action had produced improved local roads, schools, market places, water supplies, and medical services. The task force had kept the enemy main force units from the populated areas and reduced Viet Cong influence over the population. As the Australians began a phased withdrawal from Phuoc Tuy, government control had been restored to large areas. But continuing success was dependent on the presence of the task force. The Viet Cong had the ability to withdraw into sanctuary and base areas, reform and recruit, and their infrastructure in the villages was not eradicated. After the task force withdrew in late 1971, the Viet Cong influence was expected to increase and erode government control.

After visiting Phuoc Tuy province and the task force headquarters in June 1971, Robert O'Neill, now a strategic analyst and head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at The Australian National University, concluded that the outcome of the war in Indochina still lay in the balance. The main role of the Australian Task Force was now to secure the northern part of Phuoc Tuy province where there were an estimated 600 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army troops. If South Vietnamese territorial forces, numbering 6,000 in Phuoc Tuy, were unable to cope with that number of enemy forces once the Australians withdrew, 'then their whole situation is hopeless', O'Neill concluded. The South Vietnamese would need to develop experience in operating in the remote regions against the enemy, and they would lack the air support and mobility available to 1ATF. The quality of some of the local South Vietnamese forces was 'indifferent', but they were better equipped and armed than the communists. Security in the province would slip backwards once the local forces took over, but by how much remained unknown.¹⁴

Two months later, O'Neill again cautioned that although the task force had worn down the communist main force regiments and provincial force units over the past five years, the Viet Cong infrastructure had 'survived the Australian presence largely intact', and was able to

14 O'Neill, R. J. (1971) 'The War in Indo-China: A Conflict Still in the Balance', *Canberra Times*, 12 July. O'Neill visited 1ATF in June 1971 during a tour of Indochina. HQ 1ATF, message SD0988, 30 May 1971, 1ATF Commander's Diary, June 1971, [1/4/224], AWM 95.

observe, plan, and report on Australian movements. While the enemy was unable to eject the task force from Phuoc Tuy, he believed they 'can still do us a powerful amount of damage in a few short encounters, as recent events have shown'. The withdrawal could offer tempting opportunity targets to the enemy, and 'one must not forget D445 Battalion which must be ready for the fray again'.¹⁵

As the task force prepared to come home in November 1971, Creighton Burns, Assistant Editor of the *Melbourne Age*, assessed the Australian military effort in Phuoc Tuy. Burns noted that the Australians had kept substantial Viet Cong forces off balance, disrupted their supply systems, and occasionally inflicted heavy casualties on them; but they were never able to make Phuoc Tuy 'the model of counter-insurgency security' that the government maintained had been achieved. They were never properly equipped for that, and lacked the strength in numbers and supporting arms; any security provided by the task force instantly evaporated after the Australians moved on. After the Australians left Vietnam, Burns believed, the province would 'slowly revert to apathetic acceptance of Viet Cong control'.¹⁶ In fact, the collapse came much quicker and more violently than he anticipated. Four months later, the communist Easter Offensive of March/April 1972 swept over Phuoc Tuy like a tsunami. An Australian officer who observed the security situation deteriorate to the levels he had experienced at the start of the commitment in 1966, observed in some amazement that it seemed 'as if we had never really been there'.¹⁷

In what would become a familiar pattern in later conflicts, there was a gulf between the claims made by politicians and diplomats vaunting the successful completion of the mission, and the more realistic assessments of soldiers with experience on the ground.

The United States had entered the war with laudable ambitions: to resist communist aggression and subversion, and to secure the independence of an emergent, democratic Republic of South Vietnam.

15 O'Neill, Robert (1971) 'Vietnam Departure Risks: While Packing Up — A Sitting Duck?', *Financial Review*, 27 September.

16 Burns, Creighton (1971) 'The War we Didn't Win', *The Age*, 15 November; Ekins, Ashley with Ian McNeill (2012) *Fighting to the Finish: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War, 1968–1975*, Sydney Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, p. 632.

17 Major F. A. Roberts, AATTV, 1971–1972, *Interview*, Canberra 2, 3, 10 February 1978, Part II, p. 75, Canberra, AHQ file 707/R2/39 folder 11, AWM 107.

But frustration ensued as the war dragged on into a stalemate, followed by disillusionment and despair as it became a costly quagmire from which the US could neither withdraw honourably nor achieve a decisive victory.

When Saigon fell to a massive assault by conventional communist forces in April 1975, the damage to US prestige was profound. It was widely claimed that the world's greatest superpower had been defeated by a barefoot army of peasant guerrillas. This was a fallacy, but the failure of US military intervention in Vietnam continued to linger in American popular memory.

Military strategists and historians have long argued over the mistakes and lessons of the Vietnam War. Many of these arguments mirror the debates that took place during the war: how the conflict arose and developed, and the origin of American involvement; whether Vietnam was a civil war between nationalist and imperialist factions, or the focal point of a wider struggle between expansionist forces of communism and their containment by democratic capitalism; whether an enormous American military commitment to a geographically remote conflict was justified on the grounds of morality or national security; and whether the United States might have won the war through a different application of its military power.

The key to the American and allied defeat in Vietnam, however, lay in the failure of the political aims of the war, rather than the military struggle. From March 1965, when the first American combat forces arrived in Vietnam and the collapse of South Vietnam seemed imminent, the South Vietnamese Government could claim little real legitimacy to rule Vietnam. As former North Vietnamese Army Colonel Bui Tin argued, American military involvement managed to delay the communist defeat of South Vietnam, but the Americans and their allies were never able to establish the national consensus they had hoped to create: 'Rather they eroded it.'

Australia came out of the Vietnam War as awkwardly as it went in — still striving to gain access to American intentions and policy decisions, and vainly trying to influence the US to retain a strong military presence in the region.

By the most optimistic estimates, the intervention in Vietnam might be viewed merely as a holding action which may have bought time for neighbouring, emergent nations in Southeast Asia, allowing them to achieve political stability and economic security. For the nations of Indochina, however — Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam — the war resulted in enormous human loss, ecological devastation, and economic ruin.

Australia's senior military leaders later drew definite lessons from the Vietnam War. Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Daly, Chief of the General Staff, and the senior soldier responsible for the Australian Army during the Vietnam conflict, argued: 'The major lesson is that we should never allow ourselves to become involved in a war that we don't intend to win. Holding campaigns are fruitless. They result in a loss of life which is incommensurate with the results achieved.'

Daly's judgments were echoed by the former Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee, General Sir John Wilton. The principal lesson of the war, said Wilton, was, 'don't go into a war unless you are prepared to win'. With that understanding, he said, 'you've got to employ all the resources at your disposal or which can be made at your disposal' in order to win. Combat operations against enemy forces are 'not something that you can just put one foot in and feel the temperature', Wilton argued, 'you've got to jump right in'. He believed the Americans 'greatly underestimated what the war would involve, right from the start. They came into it piecemeal and didn't fully appreciate the nature of the war in which they had become involved.'¹⁸

Debate continues over the reasons for failure, and whether different approaches and applications of military force may have succeeded. Proponents of conventional warfare claim that military force offered a rapid solution, while others maintain only an unconventional, counterinsurgency strategy could have been effective. Some argue that the war exposed the limits of American military power; others that the US misapplied its military power or failed to use it decisively and without limit. Some believe the US exaggerated the strategic significance of Vietnam, others that it misjudged the issues at stake.

18 Daly and Wilton quoted in Ekins, Ashley with Ian McNeill (2012) *Fighting to the Finish: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War, 1968–1975*, Sydney Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, pp. 705–6.

But many of these may even be the wrong lessons to draw. Most analysts agree that a more decisive use of conventional military force in Vietnam may have been counter-productive, or even have led to disastrous global escalation.

For Australia, the Vietnam War stands as a reminder that open-ended military commitments carry unforeseeable risks, even when based on perceived national self-interest and strategic advantages, or conducted for altruistic or humanitarian reasons. The costs can never be accurately foreseen, and the end result is rarely what was intended.

In what has become a timeless, pessimistic observation, the nineteenth century German philosopher Hegel said experience and history teach us that 'nations and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it'.¹⁹

The lessons from Vietnam are clear for those who will read them, as Robert O'Neill has amply demonstrated in his writings. He has also drawn insights from the parallels between Britain's enthusiastic commitment to the ill-considered Gallipoli campaign in 1915 and the more recent rush to war by the Bush Administration in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. He wrote in 2013:

The lessons from history's page are obvious, but do we have politicians who are prepared to take the time necessary, and do the hard studying, to develop real expertise in the management of international security policy? The experience of the past decade suggests that we are as far away from that goal as were the national leaders of 1914–15.²⁰

If political leaders fail to grasp the lessons then, hopefully, historians, strategic analysts, and veterans will perceive them and prove more persuasive. The experience of Vietnam shows that the costs can be too great to ignore the lessons of history.

19 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1975 [1830]) *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 21.

20 O'Neill, Robert (2015) 'Gallipoli: Foreshadowing Future Conflicts' in Ashley Ekins (ed.), *Gallipoli: A Ridge too Far*, Wollombi: Exisle Publishing, p. 302.

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