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Review Essay: On Strategy

One problem – of many – the United States faced during its ten-plus year stay in Vietnam was credibility. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), by Harry G. Summers, Jr., does not suffer from that problem. Summers, a retired infantry colonel teaching at the War College in the early eighties, is the perfect person to write this tight, concise criticism of the United States' policy in Vietnam. Not initially intending to write a book, Summers presented this work first in 1981 as a lengthy critical paper on Vietnam.

Summers finds several reasons for America's defeat in the tiny jungle nation of Vietnam and forms them into his central argument: the United States lost in Vietnam because the US failed to see Vietnam in a strategic context. (2) After World War II, the United States military neglected strategy, relying more on increasing weapon stockpiles and a worldwide fear of nuclear weapons. As a result of this strategic atrophy, the US failed to see the importance of simple aspects of policy that could have led to victory. These simple things included not declaring war, failing to enlist popular support through mobilization, and the warning signs of military mistakes in Korea. (26, 31) Summers states his thesis baldly in several places but most succinctly when he states that America's loss was the result of the "failure to set a militarily obtainable political objective." (149) Of course, hindsight is twenty-

too colloquial

twenty, and Summers knows this. He does not waste words criticizing the people subjected to the policies, rather, he criticizes the processes that led to the bad policies and those too stubborn to learn as the war in Vietnam progressed.

Summers' organization breaks down the military aspects into easy-to-understand pieces and proceeds through them in a logical, straightforward fashion. For both the North Vietnamese forces and the United States/South Vietnamese alliance he addresses objectives, offensive styles, mass and economy of force, the unity of command, and the elements of surprise, security, and simplicity. Clearly North Vietnam's forces, besides being the actual victors, are victors on paper under close analysis. nicely put

It is the analysis of the infantry officer that is the most interesting aspect of the book. American culture is not particularly well known for being able to shine a critical light inward, but Summers manages to do so in a calculating manner. North Vietnam's objective of conquering the South was more direct than the US/SVN objectives of resisting aggression and practicing counterinsurgency. The North Vietnamese Army had a clear strategic goal, while the US/ARVN forces relied on a more tactical offensive style, preferring to win individual battles while the NVA was only concerned with the war as a whole. Each tactical victory chinked the US armor, as defeating Vietnamese soldiers only served to strain the relationship between the US and South Vietnam. (134)

Further disparities between the two sides helped fuel the NVA victory. The US relied on technology and massive amounts of long-distance ordnance (artillery, napalm, bombs)

while ^{the} NVA used guerrilla tactics to get in close and inflict damage. The destruction ^{caused by} of the US long-distance ordnance probably did more to set the average Vietnamese person against the US than any other US military tactic. The command structure of the NVA ^{is} army was much more united than that of the US; after all, the primary commander for the US was in Hawaii, across thousands of miles of ocean while the commanders of the NVA ^{is} army were often close to the front. The US had surprise on their side less often than the North Vietnamese or the Viet Cong. The NVA was able to operate in secrecy more effectively than the US or ARVN forces. Finally, the US had a complex system in place, not only in their military, but in needing to maintain relations with the government of South Vietnam. The NVA's most basic advantage was that they were a simple organization.

Summers points out these differences in individual chapters in Part Two. He dedicates Part One to a more scathing criticism of US policy and policy makers. While it is more clinical to point out military advantages or disadvantages, that is safer to do than to point a critical finger at the US government, which is exactly what Part One does.

Congress failed to declare war on North Vietnam, something which could have

a very questionable thesis, in my opinion: one declares war because one's country has been attacked or threatened, unless of course one is an aggressor. To insist that the DRV (NVA) actually "threatened" the US would have been very difficult.

galvanized popular support in the early days of the war. (21) While it is hard to tell if an official sanction of war would have rallied the public, there is more precedent for public support for declared wars than for military actions taken outside the context of war.

Summers points out that the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was an attempt at Congressional

sanction of the war, but it obviously fell short as it was not a full declaration of war. (24)

Here is where Summers' military perspective, his naiveté about American & world politics, is most evident, no? Does he really think Congress would have, without a wrenching & divisive debate, declared war? maybe w/ a "Clemency novel."

Other state-side factors played into the United States being relegated to moral low ground in the Vietnam War. Student deferments allowed anti-war young men to collect in a focused environment, banding them together by giving them an easy out as far as the draft was concerned. (345) *Campus Wars*, by Kenneth Heineman, is a more focused look at the anti-war movement in American colleges, but Summers touches on this movement effectively

enough by mentioning that it was present, it was fairly wide-spread, and it was another aspect of the war that the government was unable to control. *well → he wanted them declared "traitors", + suppressed legally (that's what he says, avoiding embarrassing detail, another instance of his naivete)*

Another reason Summers gives for defeat on the home front was the day-to-day reporting of the war – television brought the war home for dinner for millions of Americans.

(39) The realities of combat were surely not appropriate dinner-time viewing, but the images sent over via satellite were there for even children to absorb. The government was

largely unable to control the media during Vietnam. Apparently the military learned its lesson well; during the Gulf War of 1991, the military did not allow television news cameras

into hot combat zones and even still photographers had a difficult time following soldiers into battle. The government presented the American public with sterile video of "smart" bombs finding their inanimate targets – no blood meant no disgust, which in turn meant no controversy. The Gulf War was different from Vietnam in many aspects, such as duration, execution, and policy, but the most striking difference was in the form of media access.

Another important problem was the US military's expectation of total victory. (64)

The devastating defeats handed to Germany in World War I and Germany and Japan in

50-
no
press,
no
freedom
of
speech
and
association

— an interesting picture, no?

World War II gave the US military every reason to expect more of the same in Vietnam. The problem was that the 1960s soldier was unable to adapt to 1940s expectations of victory; victories in Vietnam were not as clear-cut as they had been in the air over England or in the Ardennes forest. That the US military complex failed to learn that victory in a limited war (Korea) was not only possible but acceptable contributed greatly to the total victory concept. ✓

(59) In this aspect, Summers' argument makes a good introduction to Tom Engelhardt's *The End of Victory Culture*, which discusses at length the American disillusionment brought on by the lack of total victory in Korea and defeat in Vietnam.

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The mistaken and changing American definition of victory forms an interwoven minor thesis to Summers' main argument. He quotes from a 1954 Army field manual that states that military victory cannot always guarantee the attainment of political objectives and that limited wars – win or lose – must sometimes be fought to achieve political goals. (67) Over the next few years, the Army's definition of victory shifted from its World War II-era definition to its 1962 definition: that victory was achieved by a quick end to hostilities and the prevention of escalation leading to a nuclear exchange. (69) This is a far cry from the subjugation of the Austrian Empire in 1918 and the occupation of Germany in 1945.

Summers asks tough questions in *On Strategy* such as "how could we have done so well in tactics and failed so miserably in strategy" (89) but unlike philosophical texts, he systematically answers the questions. Instead of excoriating the US government for its involvement in Vietnam like Gabriel Kolko and other leftist writers, Summers concentrates

on the failings of the policy makers and the mistakes the US military made. In this manner

he avoids over-analyzing the war on philosophical or moral grounds and stays focused on his

thesis. or he skips the really important stuff and tries retractively to separate "war-making" from "politics"

On Strategy is a valuable addition to a class on Vietnam, either at the undergraduate or graduate level. Naturally, it is more suited to a military-oriented class as it was written by an officer for other officers. It is not a personal cry for justice, as is Jules Roy's *The Battle of Dienbienphu*, but a focused critical work on the mistakes made in Vietnam American policy makers and the military.

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This a good, clear review of what the book is about, its major themes and organization. However, you could be more evaluative or critical, at least in terms of different arguments, ~~that~~ ^{we've read} about the key issues for Summers (US strategy + tactics). I'm not saying you are expected to rig him up, or endorse the kind of criticisms I've made, but you want to indicate, in a paper like this, what criticisms could be made, even if you then refute them. Explore the book's range + relevance, in other words, esp. vis a vis other accounts.