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Gregory A. Daddis. *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xiv + 334 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-974687-3.

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Guerrilla war has been a common phenomenon in the history of warfare from the dawn of human civilization. The guerrilla wars that became a regular sight after World War II, were, however, different in purpose from those that preceded them. Basically guerrilla war was fought at the tactical level and had two characteristics: a defensive purpose and an offensive orientation. Marking the defensive characteristic is military activity after the regular army was beaten (the Spanish guerrillas, the partisans in Yugoslavia) or was weakened from fighting, and therefore the actions of guerrilla units supplied a respite for the army to rehabilitate itself (the partisans in Russia in the course of World War II). The second characteristic, offensive attacks, assists the regular army (Lawrence of Arabia). According to Clausewitz, guerrilla fighting enables the weak side to initiate tactical attacks so as to nullify a regular army's strategic advantage. After World War II, though, guerrilla warfare, according to the doctrine of Mao Zedong, assumed a clear political nature, its objective not limited to harassing and wearing down the enemy. Thus, the decolonization wars that broke out with the decline in strength of the European powers after World War II determined new criteria, and the final objective of guerrilla wars in East Asia, Africa, and Latin America was to oust the colonial government or bring down the old regime.[1]

The various European powers, but especially Britain and France, joined by the United States, the Soviet Union, and other countries, were forced to cope with a new kind of war–revolutionary guerrilla war or, in British terminology, insurgency. For that kind of warfare, a theoretical and practical conception developed that gained the nomenclature of counterinsurgency (COIN). But it was a kind of military confrontation in which doctrines of war developed, along with the accumulation of experience and learning lessons from the experience of others. One of the critical questions emanating from theories of COIN was how could one assess, while the fighting was going on, whether the actions the army was taking were actually succeeding. This question becomes more acute in light of the fact that the confrontation in guerrilla war is conducted within a given geographical framework that does not have to be conquered. In other words, success or failure cannot be evaluated according to the size of territory occupied or the army's physical progress, as it was very clearly in World War II. Simply put, it may be said that the political criteria in that kind of war defined the objective for the army commanders: they had to arrive at the capital cities of the Axis powers. Therefore, the achievements on the battlefield could be measured at almost any moment. As mentioned, though, conquering land has no significance in the COIN conception, a fact that created and still creates great frustration, in particular among military personnel who have to deal with this phenomenon.

Gregory Daddis's book examines in depth the ways in which the American army attempted to assess the degree of its success in the course of the Vietnam War. The first chapter surveys the development of COIN theories, while emphasizing the military side of the various theories and the evaluation methods that were developed. This chapter provides a brief, clear summary of the development of COIN theories in the West and the American ways of fighting, whether through the experience of others or as a result of learning lessons from their own experiences. The second chapter is to a great extent a continuation of the first, dealing with the initial attempts of the American army to examine the extent of its success, not only in light of the theories with which it arrived in Vietnam but also as a result of deriving lessons from the political and military reality in South Vietnam prior to the Americanization of the war in 1965. In other words, even here it can be stated that Daddis's book can enter the pantheon of theoretical and historical literature about the COIN phenomenon.

The question becomes sharper in light of the American strategy formulated by the commander of American

forces in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland. As a veteran of the European theater in World War II and the Korean War, Westmoreland had accumulated much experience in military maneuvering, which was based on high fire power and the mobility of the American army. The objective was to forcibly prevent the attempt by the North Vietnamese to occupy South Vietnam by eliminating the military, political, and logistical infrastructure of the Viet Cong. In order to achieve this goal, Westmoreland used the strategy of attrition. The American command estimated that the human and logistical resources of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army were limited, in contrast to the unlimited resources of the United States. In order to bring about the attrition of the enemy, the United States employed all its conventional military power. The tactic employed was that of "search and destroy" with different troop scopes, with some of the missions, such as Operation Cedar Falls or Operation Junction City, being executed with the use of several divisions. The search-and-destroy tactic held that from the moment contact was made between an American unit and a guerrilla unit, the whole power of the army in the area was to be applied: artillery support, attack helicopters, and the use of helicopters to transfer troops; and if this aid was insufficient, then fighter planes were dispatched to bomb. This pattern operated successfully in the battle that the First Cavalry Division conducted in the Ia Drang Valley; and in the view of Daddis (p. 83) and others, it shaped the American strategy in the ground war in South Vietnam until the Tet offensive.

The Vietnam War was a war with no defined front line. Military victories and defeats could not be measured according to territories conquered, since in effect the occupation of land in its classic structure had no military significance. Therefore, another way was required to measure an army's progress. The measure of success adopted was to count bodies, both of those killed and those taken captive, and to count the number of arms seized from the communists after each battle, and not the number of villagers who supported the government. Units earned prizes, decorations, and vacation if they presented high body counts. High body counts, a subject that Daddis discusses extensively, did not begin with the Vietnam War; however, it became most identified with that war and offered an index of success.[2] Here we clearly see the fact that the United States was conducting a quantitative war. As an industrial society, the United States measured the success of a certain economic body according to terms of profit and loss over a period, say monthly, quarterly, or yearly, compared to previous similar periods, along with a forecast of the future. The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) documents, which Daddis analyzed in depth, offered dozens of periodic reports that summarized the number of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese killed, the number of communists who defected or were captured, and also the number and type of weapons seized. This organization culture, as it were, lay at the base of the desire to quantify the achievements of the war in Vietnam for politicians and public opinion in the United States.

The body-count system formed the heart of the strategy of attrition of the U.S. Army in Vietnam. The army had need to present its success on the battlefield in concrete form, but it was difficult to present villagers who on the surface seemed to be supporters of South Vietnam to the scores of journalists who wandered around and within fighting units and, through them, to the American public and to decision-makers. There was need to display dismembered bodies, captives, and weapons manufactured in the Soviet Union or China that the American army had seized in the course of military operations. "Body counts" and the terms "confirmed kills" and "kill ratio" became expressions most identified with the Vietnam War.

This system of evaluation could have been positive, because it brought about competition among the units, and the intention was that the rewards would lead to improvement in performance by the fighting units and to increased motivation. In general, though, the study asserts that this system was fundamentally flawed. The statistics were inflated to give the impression that there was progress in the war.[3] The high command pressured division and regimental commanders to attain high body counts, and this operations pressure filtered down to the fighting units. Combat officers knew that high body counts were a sure guarantee of military promotion, and contemporary studies pointed to the fact that reports from the battlefield were inflated by as much as 100 percent.[4] The pressure on the fighters by their company commanders, who remained back at their secure bases, led in certain instances to strategically useless operations, such as the battle for Hill 937 (Hamburger Hill). In other cases, the system resulted in the killing of civilians.

It is important to note that despite the fact that it was known that estimates of the number of enemy kills were exaggerated, Vo Nguyen Giap, the North Vietnamese commander in chief, admitted in an interview that the number of losses among the communists was close to half a million (as of the time when the interview was conducted).[5] This estimate was very close to the official

data of the U.S. Army, which was based on body counts from the battlefields. Mueller argues that the figure that Giap conveyed was correct, and was not given to serve any propaganda purposes.[6] Similarly, it should be remembered that despite the exaggerations on the American side, these were offset by a number of factors. First, the communists made great efforts to clear away bodies from a battlefield.[7] It may be presumed with great certainty that many communists died as a result of illnesses, undernourishment, or the lack of proper medical care in the wake of illness or battle wounds. Furthermore, no body counts were made after artillery bombardments and air strikes. It is difficult to presume that bodies would have been found after the carpet bombings of B-52 bombers or after the use of napalm. The surprising fact is that despite all the criticism of the body-count system, as already mentioned, the study in the end accepts the final American estimate.[8]

The body count also represented a quest for the Viet Cong's breaking point; in other words, a search for the stage at which the number of kills exceeded the Viet Cong's recruitment ability. The breaking point was in effect a concrete manifestation of America's ultimate object in Vietnam, which was to prevent the communists from uniting North and South Vietnam under communist control; therefore, there was need to "convince" North Vietnam to halt the communist struggle in the south. It was clear that as many communist fighters as possible had to be hit, but the decision-makers and the operational ranks did not know how many guerrilla fighters and political cadres had to be killed in order to cross the breaking point.[9]

Along with the military war, a civilian system was also at work, and it was responsible for a range of programs in the area of civic action and half the military programs, such as the Chieu Hoi Program and the Phoenix Program. The civilian headquarters, Civil Operations and Revolutionary (Rural) Development Support (CORDS), operated an evaluation system of its own. Known as the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES), it began operating in January 1967. Daddis examines the substance of this system in the last chapters of the book and identifies the evaluation patterns suitable for COIN. HES was based on questionnaires and interviews among the local population in villages where the programs were carried out. The statistical data were gathered monthly, and thus the Americans had a precise measure, in their opinion, of the advance or withdrawal in the support of the local population in order to evaluate the effectiveness of those programs that month or year. The central measure investigated was whether the villagers felt secure in their villages. At the end of 1971, HES reports claimed that 97 percent of the villagers felt secure to one degree or another. This amazingly high percentage raises questions about its reliability and the reliability of the system as a whole. Therefore, it seems an attempt should be made to examine the effectiveness of the various programs that the United States put into operation by investigating the Viet Cong response. Thus, a fuller picture will be obtained not only through a COIN assessment but also through an evaluation of the various military, political, and also economic steps that are necessary for minimizing the insurgency phenomenon.

The Vietnam War, it should be remembered, ended as a conventional war. The period from the start of American involvement until the Tet offensive (in the first half of 1968) is characterized as a guerrilla war. The failure of the Viet Cong to drive the American forces out of Vietnam and the lack of success in bringing down the South Vietnamese government led to the growing intervention of North Vietnam. The initial years of the Vietnam War constituted a political struggle. The Viet Cong fought to obtain the sympathy and support of the rural population, and it was not its intent to conquer territory and come into direct confrontation with the South Vietnamese Army or to defeat the American army. The Tet offensive marks in many senses a watershed in the Vietnam War. The Viet Cong failed in its efforts to control the rural population after the gamut of pacification programs that the United States operated in cooperation with the government of South Vietnam. Despite causing a deep shock to the American public and intensifying protest movements in the United States, the Tet offensive was a strategic calamity for the Viet Cong. Adding to their defeat on both the military and civilian fronts was the successful operation of the Chieu Hoi and Phoenix programs, which in effect wiped out the Viet Cong's political infrastructure in rural areas.

The severe beating that the Viet Cong absorbed led to the deepening involvement of the North Vietnamese Army. Regular units crossed the border and began their attempts to control the northern and western parts of South Vietnam. In the Mekong Delta region, the North Vietnamese Army did not succeed in establishing a basis, and there it continued with a guerrilla war until the conclusion of the war and the occupation of South Vietnam. However, even the battles conducted by the North Vietnamese Army against the Americans continued in the format of a guerrilla war, but the nature of the struggle had changed. The North Vietnamese now intended to bring about the withdrawal of American forces and, in so doing, to control all of South Vietnam. North Viet-

nam did not implement programs in the civilian area, because logistically it did not need the support of the South Vietnamese people. Until February 1973, the date when the last American soldiers exited Vietnam, a double war was being waged–a conventional war and a guerrilla war in the classic sense–in the Delta region. The final stage of the Vietnam War was in actuality a conventional war in which armored divisions and infantry fought each other. Viet Cong guerrillas fought alongside the North Vietnamese Army in the framework of commando units operating behind enemy lines. The course of events points clearly to the fact that the Viet Cong had been mortally wounded from the second half of 1968 and that its power and influence in the southern part of the country had been greatly weakened.

The American army estimated that the Tet offensive brought about the breaking point of the Viet Cong–that is, it produced a higher number of killed than the number of recruits–an assessment based on body-count reports. The combination of the Phoenix and Chieu Hoi programs harmed the communist infrastructure in the south even more. The growing involvement of the North Vietnamese Army and the change in communist strategy clearly point to the fact that the American estimates were correct. However, public opinion in the United States was already tired of war, and in 1969, despite successes by the U.S. Army, President Nixon ordered a gradual evacuation of American forces from Vietnam.

How, then, can one assess the effectiveness of the military operations of an army fighting in a guerrilla war? Clearly the occupation of territory is no index here. Therefore, an attempt must be made to evaluate the harm done to enemy infrastructure, especially its personnel. The army relies on its intelligence sources in order to carry out this evaluation. These sources, for their part, rely to a great extent on data arriving from the battlefield. The more reliable the reporting system that is built, the more precise and reliable the evaluation that will result, providing a measure that can describe the extent of progress (or retreat) of the army in its war. Body counts, if performed reliably, can provide a good measure, but only if intelligence knows the initial number of guerrilla fighters and the rate of new fighters joining them. An important part of carrying out this evaluation is to estimate the enemy's response. Information derived from collaborators, captives, and defectors can provide the most reliable measure. Questionnaires should be developed that will aid in interrogating captives and defectors, and an information cross-check system should also be developed that will enable investigating several information sources simultaneously and so lead to a more precise assessment. Finally a uniform system must be constructed that will integrate the complex of information-collection bodies. It is clear that policymakers must define the objectives of the war for the military echelon, especially in a limited war. These definitions will enable an army to develop a reliable evaluation system. In discussing the progress of this or another army, research must relate to all the foregoing sources, and not rely just on one source, to determine the fate of the army for better or for worse.

The book under review is based on an estimable critical analysis of rich, diverse archival material, together with an appropriate integration of interviews with various personalities who operated in the period of the Vietnam War and the use of secondary literature relevant to the author's field of research. But the book offers more than this. The work deals, of course, with an important historical chapter, but the relevancy of Daddis's study to our time is clear, and his contribution is important not only to the historiography of the Vietnam War but also to those who deal with the exhausting, frustrating wars against insurgents around the world. This book should be read not only by historians concerned with the COIN phenomenon in general and the Vietnam War in particular, but also by those who work diligently on COIN programs today. The volume demonstrates how important it is to study the lessons of the past in order both not to repeat errors and to try to improve on models of action that have proved successful.

Notes

[1]. John Shy and Thomas W. Collier, "Revolutionary War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 815-862; Ian F.W. Beckett, "Guerrilla Warfare. Insurgency and Counterinsurgency since 1945," in *Warfare in the Twentieth Century: Theory and Practice*, ed. Colin McInnes and G. D. Sheffield (London: Routledge, 1980), 194-212.

[2]. In this context, see Scott S. Gartner and Marissa E. Myers, "Body Count and 'Success' in the Vietnam and Korean Wars," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 25, no. 3 (1995): 377-395.

[3]. Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 203.

[4]. Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 156, 159, 227.

[5]. *The Washington Post*, April 6, 1969.

[6]. John E. Mueller, "The Search for the 'Breaking Point' in Vietnam: The Statistics of a Deadly Quarrel," *International Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1980): 506.