



Formula for Failure in Vietnam: The Folly of Limited Warfare by William Hamilton.

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With *Formula for Failure in Vietnam*, William Hamilton (PhD, Nebraska)¹ has produced a concise, well reasoned critique of Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara's conduct of the war in Vietnam. He identifies the, in his view, true reasons for the United States' failure to defeat the Communists and preserve South Vietnam. Rather than laying guilt at the feet of specific individuals, however, he is more interested in analyzing how the philosophy of limited war as understood by the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations came to dominate policy circles.

Hamilton treads a well-worn path in discussing the background of US involvement in South-east Asia. Like H.R. McMaster,² he stresses civil-military relations. He finds that, by 1965, "the voice of the military at the national council table became so enfeebled that it could not compete with the self-confident civilian strategists who required the Armed Forces to wage war under unfavorable conditions" (11). His summary of the conflict between McNamara and the service chiefs will be familiar to scholars, but terra incognita to students and junior officers. Rather than simply reprising Harry Summers's argument,³ however, Hamilton maintains that the central lesson of the US experience in Vietnam is that "our civilian and military leadership must learn to understand the capabilities and limitations of each other" (14).

After a general summary of his target problem, the author pinpoints the factors that underlay the failed effort in Vietnam. He makes effective use of topics such as the Joint Chiefs' corrosive relationship with President Johnson and McNamara, the policy of gradualism, mutual antagonism between the military and the media, and the extent to which the Department of Defense—especially the US Army—created many of the institutional barriers to success in Vietnam. Among these ills, the outsourcing of many tasks formerly conducted by uniformed officers to "defense intellectuals," and the defects of the Army's evaluation and promotion system for officers, receive special criticism. He particularly deplores the intellectuals' arrogant assumption that "almost any problem, if properly analyzed, was capable of an American solution" (34). This hubris led them to treat South Vietnam as a gigantic laboratory for testing pet theories with no consideration for the humanity of anyone involved.

Chapter 7, "Conduct Unbecoming," is an astute analysis of the careerism that pervaded the officer corps during the war. Hamilton attributes the moral failures that led to inflated body counts, "fragging" of unpopular officers, and war crimes like the My Lai massacre to an organizational culture responding to external conditions imposed on it by American society. Exacerbating this state of affairs was the fact that

1. Hamilton is a veteran of two tours in Vietnam with the 1st Air Cavalry Division (1966-67, 1970-71) and winner of a silver star among many other honors.

2. In *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (NY: HarperCollins, 1997).

3. See *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Novato, CA: Presidio Pr, 1982).

The personnel managers in each of the Army's separate branches made detailed analyses of promotion board results and published their findings to the members of their branch. Not only did officers become locked in a keen competition for higher rank, but so did the separate branches—each determined to place more of its members on the next promotion list. (115)

Hamilton uses the US Army War College's 1970 study of professionalism to underscore his conclusion that the Army's "up or out [promotion and retention] policy operated to demand faultless perfection but in fact received only a presentation of statistics—manipulated if necessary—to indicate zero defects" (116). He is building here on the conclusions of Andrew Krepinevich⁴ regarding the misapplication of the lessons of World War II to the conflict in Vietnam.

Hamilton never recommends giving the military a "free hand," à la von Moltke the Elder. Instead, he stipulates the specific conditions requisite for an optimal state of civil-military affairs. To begin with,

the president must be satisfied that the military leadership does indeed know what it is talking about and has not been misled by optimistic reports stemming from [either] promotion-centered dishonesty or by institutional aggrandizement.... The military should not be allowed to develop military strategy in a vacuum [but] should not have *military* strategy dictated to it by outsiders.... The civilian leadership must make certain the war as a whole is conducted in accordance with whatever laws of warfare the society adopts. (132)

In making this declaration, Hamilton carefully distinguishes battlefield tactics from the development of "grand strategy."

The author concludes with some cautionary words about current US military engagements around the world, which reflect a demonstrable failure by successive administrations to learn from the civil-military mistakes made in Vietnam. His arguments here make his book relevant to current events and the proper role of uniformed leaders in formulating national policy.

The book has its flaws, mostly minor.⁵ But the lack of source references within the text is unfortunate. Hamilton interviewed some key senior personnel during his time as a student at the US Naval War College (1970-71); their assertions are not always tied to specific published sources. Finally, some of the wording in the concluding chapter betrays an apparent partisan political bias regarding policy choices made by both Republican and Democratic presidents since the 1970s.

Despite these shortcomings, *Formula for Failure* is well written, highly readable, and based on serious scholarship.⁶ It should be required reading in every college course on the war in Vietnam and at every level of US professional military education as well. This would help ameliorate the appalling lack of historical awareness among Americans today, including many members of the nation's military.

4. *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 1986).

5. I noticed a few typographical errors and a misattribution of date: the US military mission in Iraq closed out in 2011, not 2012.

6. The single-spaced fifteen-page bibliography is neatly divided by type of source.