The Pentagon’s Dilemma

GOLIATH AND THE GUERRILLA  Eric Hobsbawn

Three things have won conventional wars in this century: greater reserves of manpower, greater industrial potential, and a reasonably functioning system of civilian administration. The strategy of the United States in the past two decades has been based on the hope that the second of these (in which it is supreme) would offset the first, in which the USSR was believed to have the edge. This theory was based on faulty arithmetic in the days when the only war envisaged was one against Russia, for the Warsaw Pact powers have no greater population than NATO. The West was merely more reluctant to mobilize its manpower in conventional ways. However, at present the argument is probably more valid, for some of the Western states (like France) will almost certainly stay neutral in any world war that is likely, and China alone has more men than all the Western powers likely to fight in concert. At all events, whether the arguments were right or wrong, the United States has since 1945 put its money entirely on the superiority of its industrial power, on its capacity to throw into a war more machinery and more explosives than anyone else.

Consequently, it has been badly shaken to discover that a new method of winning wars has been developed in our time, and that it more than offsets the organization and industrial power of conventional military operations. That is guerrilla war, and the number of Goliaths who have been felled by Davids with slingshots is now very impressive: the Japanese in China, the Germans in wartime Yugoslavia, the British in Israel, the French in Indo-China and Algeria. At present the United States itself is undergoing the same treatment in South Vietnam. Hence the anguished attempts to pit bombs against small men behind trees, or to discover the gimmick (for surely there must be one?) which allows a few thousand ill-armed peasants to hold at bay the greatest military power on earth. Hence also the simple refusal to believe that it can be so. If the United States is baffled it must be due to some other—measurable and bombable—reason: to the aggressive North Vietnamese, who actually sympathize with their Southern brothers and smuggle trickles of supplies to them; to the terrible Chinese who have the nerve to possess a common border with North Vietnam; and no doubt eventually to the Russians. Before common sense flies completely out of the window, it is therefore worth taking a look at the nature of modern guerrilla war.

There is nothing new about operations of a guerrilla type. Every peasant society is familiar with the “noble” bandit or Robin Hood who “takes from the rich to give to the poor” and escapes the clumsy traps of soldiers and policemen until he is betrayed. For as long as no peasant will give him away and as long as plenty will tell him about the movements of his enemies, he really is as immune to hostile weapons and as invisible to hostile eyes as the legends and songs about such bandits invariably claim.

Both the reality and the legend are to be found in our age, literally from China to Peru. Like the military resources of the bandit, those of the guerrilla are the obvious ones: elementary armaments reinforced by a detailed knowledge of difficult and inaccessible terrain, mobility, physical endurance superior to that of the pursuers, but above all a refusal to fight on the enemy’s terms, in concentrated force, and face to face. But the guerrilla’s major asset is nonmilitary and without it he is helpless: he must have the sympathy and support, active and passive, of the local population. Any Robin Hood who loses it is dead, and so is any guerrilla. Every textbook of guerrilla warfare begins by pointing this out, and it is the one thing that military instruction in “counterinsurgency” cannot teach.

The main difference between the ancient, and in most peasant societies endemic, form of band operation and the modern guerrilla is that the Robin Hood type of social bandit has extremely modest and limited military objectives (and usually only a very small and localized force). The test of a guerrilla group comes when it sets itself such ambitious tasks as the overthrow of a political regime or the expulsion of a regular force of occupiers, and especially when it sets out to do this not in some remote corner of a country (the “liberated area”) but over the entire national territory. Until the early 20th century hardly any guerrilla movements faced this test; they operated in extremely inaccessible and marginal regions—mountain country is the commonest example—or opposed relatively primitive and inefficient governments, native or foreign. Guerrilla actions have sometimes played an important part in major modern wars, either alone in exceptionally favorable conditions, as with the Tyrolese against the French in 1809, or more usually, as auxiliaries to regular forces—during the Napoleonic Wars, for example, or

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in our century in Spain and Russia. However, by themselves and for any length of time, they almost certainly had little more than nuisance value, as in Southern Italy, where Napoleon's French were never seriously inconvenienced by them. That may be one reason why they did not much preoccupy military thinkers until the 20th century. Another reason, which may explain why even revolutionary soldiers did not think much about them, was that practically all effective guerrillas were ideologically conservative, even if socially rebellious. Few peasants had been converted to left-wing political views or followed left-wing political leaders.

The novelty of modern guerrilla war, therefore, is not so much military. The guerrillas of today, may have at their disposal much better equipment than did their predecessors, but they are still invariably much worse armed than their opponents (they derive a large part of their armament—in the early stages, probably most of it—from what they can capture, buy or steal from the other side, and not, as Pentagon folklore holds, from foreign supplies). Until the ultimate phase of guerrilla war, when the guerrilla force becomes an army, and may actually face and defeat its adversaries in open battle, as at Dienbienphu, there is nothing in the purely military pages of Mao, Vo Nguyen Giap, Che Guevara or other manuals of guerrilla warfare, which a traditional guerrillero or band leader would regard as other than simple common sense.

The novelty is political, and it is of two kinds. First, situations are now more common when the guerrilla force can rely on mass support in widely different areas of its country. It does so in part by appealing to the common interest of the poor against the rich, the oppressed against the government; and in part by exploiting nationalism or the hatred of foreign occupiers (often of another color). It is, once again, only the folklore of military experts that “peasants want only to be left alone.” They don't. When they have no food, they want food; when they have no land, they want land; when they are cheated by the officials of a remote capital, they want to get rid of them. But above all they want rights as men and, when ruled by foreigners, to get rid of the foreigners. One ought to add that an effective guerrilla war is possible only in countries in which such appeals can be successfully made to a high percentage of the rural population in a high proportion of the country's territory. One of the major reasons for the defeat of guerrilla war in Malaya and Kenya was that these conditions did not obtain; the guerrillas were drawn almost entirely from among the Chinese or Kikuyu, whereas the Malays (the rural majority) and the rest of Kenya remained largely outside the movement.

The second political novelty is the nationalization not only of support for the guerrillas but of the guerrilla force itself, by means of parties and movements of national and sometimes international scope. The partisan unit is no longer a purely local growth; it is a body of permanent and mobile cadre from which the local force is formed. They link it with other units into a “guerrilla army” capable of nation-wide strategy and of being transformed into a “real” army. They also link it with the noncombatant national movement in general, and the politically decisive cities in particular. This implies a fundamental change in the character of such forces; it does not mean that guerrilla armies are now composed of hard-core revolutionaries infiltrated from outside. However numerous and enthusiastic the volunteers, the outside recruitment of guerrillas is limited partly by technical considerations, partly because many potential recruits, especially from among city intellectuals and workers, are simply not qualified; they lack the sort of experience which only guerrilla action or peasant life can give. Guerrillas may be started by a nucleus of cadres, but even a totally infiltrated force such as the Communist units which maintained themselves for some years after 1945 in Aragon (Spain) soon had to begin systematically recruiting among the local population. The bulk of any successful guerrilla force is always likely to consist of local men, or of professional fighters who were once recruited as local men, and the military advantages of this are immense, as Che Guevara has pointed out, for the local man “has his friends, to whom he can make a personal appeal for help; he knows the terrain and all the things that are likely to happen in the region; and he will also have the extra enthusiasm of the man who is defending his own home.” But if the guerrilla force is an amalgam of outside cadres and local recruits, it will nevertheless have been entirely transformed. It will not only have unprecedented cohesion, discipline and morale, developed by systematic education (in literacy as well as military techniques) and political training but unprecedented long-range mobility. The “Long March” transferred Mao’s Red army from one end of China to the other, and Tito’s partisans achieved similar migrations after similar defeats. And wherever the guerrilla army goes, it will apply the essential principles of guerrilla war which are, almost by definition, inapplicable to orthodox forces: (1) To pay for everything supplied by the local population; (2) not to rape the local women; (3) to bring land, justice and schools wherever they go; and (4) never to live better than, or otherwise than, the local inhabitants.

Such forces, operating as part of a nation-wide political movement and under conditions of popular support, have proved themselves extraordinarily formidable. At their best they simply cannot be defeated by orthodox military operations. Even when less successful, they can be defeated, according to the calculations of British counterinsurgency experts in Malaya and elsewhere, only by a minimum of ten men on the ground for every single guerrilla; that is to say, in South Vietnam by a minimum of something like a million Americans and puppet Vietnamese. (In fact, the 8,000 Malayan guerrillas immobilized 140,000 soldiers and policemen.) As the United States is now discovering, orthodox military methods are quite beside the point: bombs don’t work unless there is something other than paddies to make craters in. The “official” or foreign forces soon realize that the only way to fight guerrillas is by attacking their base, i.e., the civilian population. Various ways of doing this have been proposed, from the old-fashioned Nazi method of treating all civilians as potential guerrillas, through more selective massacre and torture, to the presently popular device of kidnaping entire populations and concentrating them in fortified village compounds, in the hope of depriving the guerrillas of their indispensable source of supplies and intelligence. The U.S. forces, with their usual taste for
solving social problems by technological means, appear to have a preference for destroying everything over large areas, presumably in the hope either that all guerrillas in the area will be killed along with the rest of the human, animal and vegetable life, or that somehow all those trees and underbrush will be vaporized, leaving the guerrillas standing up and visible, where they can be bombed like real soldiers. Barry Goldwater’s plan to defoliate the Vietnamese forests by nuclear bombs was no more grotesque than what is actually being attempted along these lines.

The difficulty with such methods is that they merely confirm the local population in their support of the guerrillas, and provide the latter with a constant supply of recruits. Hence, the anti-guerrillas devise plans to cut the ground from under the enemy’s feet by improving the economic and social conditions of the local population, rather in the manner of King Frederick William I of Prussia who is reported to have run after his subjects in Berlin, beating them with his stick and shouting: “I want you to love me.” But it is not easy to convince people that their conditions are being improved while their wives and children are being drenched in burning oil, especially when the people doing the drenching live (by Vietnamese standards) like princes.

Anti-guerrilla governments are more likely to talk about, say, giving peasants the land, than actually doing it, but even when they carry out a series of such reforms they do not necessarily gain the gratitude of the peasants. Oppressed peoples do not want economic improvement alone. The most formidable insurrectionary movements (including very notably the Vietnamese) are those that combine national and social elements. A people who want bread and also independence cannot be conciliated merely by a more generous distribution of bread. The British met the revolutionary agitation of the Irish under Parnell and Davitt in the 1880s by a combination of coercion and economic reform, and not without success—but this did not forestall the Irish revolutionary movement which threw them out in 1916-22.

Nevertheless, there are limitations to a guerrilla army’s ability to win a war, though it usually has effective means to avoid losing one.

In the first place, guerrilla strategy is by no means applicable everywhere on a national scale, and that is why it has failed, or partly failed, in a number of countries, e.g., Malaya and Burma. Internal divisions and hostilities—racial, religious, etc.—within a country or a region may limit the guerrilla base to one part of the people, while automatically providing a potential base for anti-guerrilla action in another. To take an obvious case: the Irish Revolution of 1916-22, essentially a combination of occupying countries determined to suppress them. This may be the case with the Kurds, superb and persistent guerrilla fighters of the traditional kind, but who have never achieved their independence.

Beyond these obstacles which vary from country to country, there is the problem of cities. However, great the support for the movement in the cities, however urban the origin of its leaders, cities and especially capital cities are the last places a guerrilla army will capture or, unless very badly advised, tackle. The Chinese Communists’ road to Shanghai and Canton ran via Yenan. The Italian and French resistance movements timed their urban insurrections (Paris, 1944; Milan and Turin, 1945) for the very last moments before the arrival of Allied armies, and the Poles who did not (Warsaw, 1943) were wiped out. The power of modern industry, transport and administration can be neutralized for a significant length of time only where it lies thin on the ground. Small-scale harassment, such as the cutting of one or two roads and rail tracks, can disrupt military movement and administration in difficult rural terrain, but not in the big city. Guerrilla action or its equivalent is entirely possible in the city — after all, how many bank robbers are ever caught in London? — and there have been some recent examples of it, for instance in Barcelona in the late 1940s, and various cities in Latin America. But it has little more than nuisance value, and merely serves to create a general atmosphere of lack of confidence in the efficiency of the regime, or to tie down armed forces and police which might be better used elsewhere.

Finally, the most crucial limitation of guerrilla warfare is that it cannot win until it becomes regular warfare, in which case it must meet its enemies on their strongest ground. It is comparatively easy for a widely backed guerrilla movement to eliminate official power from the countryside, except for the strong points actually physically occupied by armed forces, and to leave in government or occupation control no more than the isolated cities and garrisons, linked by a few main roads or railroads (and that only by daylight), and by air or radio. The real problem is to get beyond that point. Textbooks
devote a good deal of attention to this ultimate phase of guerrilla war, which the Chinese and Vietnamese handled with brilliant success against Chiang Kai-shek and the French. However, those successes should not induce mistaken generalizations. The real strength of guerrilla armies lies not in their ability to turn themselves into regular armies capable of expelling other conventional forces but in their political strength. The total withdrawal of popular support may produce the collapse of local governments, often—as in China and Vietnam— heralded by mass desertions to the guerrillas; a crucial military success by the guerrillas may bring this collapse into the open. Fidel Castro’s rebel army did not win Havana when it had demonstrated that it could not only hold the Sierra Maestra but also take the provincial capital of Santiago, the government apparatus of Batista collapsed.

Foreign occupying forces are likely to be less vulnerable and less inefficient. However, even they may be convinced that they are in a war they cannot win, that even their temerous hold can be maintained only at quite disproportionate cost. The decision to call off the wasting game is naturally humiliating, and there are always good reasons for postponing it, because it will rarely happen that the foreign forces have been decisively defeated, even in local actions like Dien Bienphu. The Americans are still in Saigon, apparently drinking their bourbon peacefully, except perhaps for an occasional bomb in a café. Their columns still crisscross the country apparently at will, and their losses are not much greater than those from traffic accidents at home. Their aircraft are dropping bombs wherever they like, and there is still somebody who can be called the prime minister of “free” Vietnam, though it may be hard to forecast from one day to the next who he will be.

Thus, it can always be argued that just one more effort will tip the balance: more troops, more bombs, more massacres and torture, more “social missions.” The history of the Algerian War anticipates the one in Vietnam in this respect. By the time it was over, half a million Frenchmen were in uniform there (against a total Moslem population of 9 million, or one soldier to every eighteen inhabitants, not counting the pro-French local white population), and the army was still asking for more, including the destruction of the French Republic.

It is hard, in such circumstances, to cut one’s losses, but there are occasions when no other decision makes sense. Some governments may take it earlier than others. The British evacuated Ireland and Israel well before their military position had become untenable. The French hung on for nine years in Vietnam and for seven years in Algeria, but went in the end. For what is the alternative? The old style of local or marginal guerrilla actions, like border raiding by tribesmen, could be isolated or contained by various relatively cheap devices which did not interfere with the ordinary life of a country or its occupiers. A few squadrons of aircraft could occasionally bomb villages (a favorite British device in the Middle East between the wars), a military frontier zone could be established (as on the old northwest frontier of India), and in extreme cases governments tacitly left some remote and disturbed region to its own devices for a while, merely seeing to it that the trouble did not spread. In a situation like that of Vietnam today or of Algeria in the later 1950s, this will simply not work. If a people does not want to be ruled in the old way any more, there is nothing much that can be done. Of course, if elections had been held in South Vietnam in 1956, as was provided by the Geneva agreements, the views of its people might have been discovered at considerably less cost.

Where does this leave the anti-insurrectionaries? It would be foolish to pretend that guerrilla war is an invariable recipe for successful revolution or that its hopes, as of now, are realistic in more than a limited number of relatively undeveloped countries. The theorists of “counterinsurgency” can therefore take comfort in the thought that they need not always lose. But that is not the point. When, for one reason or another, a guerrilla war has become genuinely national and nation-wide, and has expelled the official administration from wide stretches of the countryside, the chances of defeating it are zero. That the mau mau were defeated in Kenya is no help to the Ameri-

cans in Vietnam; all the less help when we remember that Kenya is now independent, and the mau mau regarded as pioneers and heroes of the national struggle. That the Burmese Government has never been overthrown by guerrillas was no help to the French in Algeria. The problem of President Johnson is Vietnam, not the Philippines, and the situation in Vietnam is lost.

What remain in such a situation are illusions and terror. The rationalizations of today’s Washington policy were all anticipated in Algeria. We were told by French official spokesmen that the ordinary Algerian was on the side of France, or if not actually pro-French, that he wanted only peace and quiet but was terrorized by the FLN. We were told, practically once a week, that the situation had improved, that it was now stabilized, that another month should see the forces of order regain the initiative, that all they needed was another few thousand soldiers and another few million francs. We were told that the rebellion would soon die down, once it was deprived of its foreign sanctuary and source of supplies. That sanctuary (Tunisia) was bombed and the border hermetically sealed. We were told that if only the great center of Moslem subversion in Cairo could be eliminated, everything would be all right. The French therefore made war on Egypt. In the last stages we were told that there might just conceivably be some people who really wanted to get rid of the French, but since the FLN obviously did not represent the Algerian people, but only a gang of ideological infiltrators, it would be grossly unfair to the Algerians to negotiate with them. We were told about the minorities which had to be protected against terror. The only thing we were not told was that France would if necessary use nuclear weapons, because the French didn’t then have any. What was the result? Algeria is today governed by the FLN.

The means by which the illusions are to come true is terror, mostly—in the nature of things—against noncombatants. There is the old-fashioned terror against civilians by frightened soldiers, demoralized by the fact that in this kind of war any civilian may be an enemy fighter, and culminating in the infamous mass reprisals—the razing of villages, such as the Nazis’ Lidice and Oradour. Intelligent anti-guerrillas
will discourage this, since it is apt to make the local population totally hostile. Still, such terror and reprisals will happen. Furthermore, there will be the more selective torturing of prisoners for information. In the past there may have been some moral limitation on such torture, but not, alas, in our time. In fact, we have so far forgotten the elementary reflexes of humanity that in Vietnam we photograph torturers and victims and release the pictures to the press.

A second kind of terror is that which is at the base of all modern warfare, whose targets nowadays are essentially the civilians rather than the combatants. (Nobody would ever have developed nuclear weapons for any other purpose.) In orthodox warfare the purpose of indiscriminate mass destruction is to break the morale of population and government, and to destroy the industrial and administrative base on which any orthodox war effort must rest. Neither task is as easy in guerrilla war, because there are hardly any cities, factories, communications or other installations to destroy, and nothing like the vulnerable central administration machine of an advanced state. On the other hand, more modest success may pay off. If terror convinces even a single area to withhold support from the guerrillas, and thus to drive them elsewhere, this is a net gain for the anti-guerrillas. So the temptation to go on bombing and burning at random is irresistible, especially for countries like the United States which could strip the entire surface of South Vietnam of life without dipping too deeply into its supply of armaments or money.

Lastly, there is that most hopeless and desperate form of terror, which the United States is at present applying: the threat to extend the war to other nations unless they can somehow get the guerrillas to stop. This has no rational justification at all. If the Vietnamese war were really what the State Department pretends, namely an “indirect” foreign aggression without “a spontaneous and local rebellion,” then no bombing of North Vietnam would be necessary. The Vietcong would be of no more importance in history than the attempts to set up guerrilla warfare in Spain after 1945, which faded away, leaving few traces except some local newspaper stories and a few publications by Spanish policemen. Conversely, if the people of South Vietnam really were on the side of whatever general at present claims to be their government, or merely wanted to be left in peace, there would be no more trouble in that country than in neighboring Cambodia or Burma, both of which had or still have guerrilla movements.

But it is clear by now, and should always have been clear, that the Vietcong will not go away quietly, and no miracle will transform South Vietnam into a stable anti-Communist republic within the foreseeable future. As most governments in the world know (though one or two, like the British, are too dependent on Washington to say so) there can be no military solution in Vietnam without at least a major conventional land war in the Far East, which would probably escalate into a world war when, sooner or later, the United States discovered that it could not win such a conventional war either. And it would be fought by several hundreds of thousands of American troops, because the allies of the United States, though doubtless willing to send a token battalion or ambulance unit, are not fools enough to involve themselves seriously in a conflict of this kind. The pressure to escalate a little further will mount, and so will the Pentagon belief in the most suicidal of all the many Vietnamese illusions—that in the last showdown the North Vietnamese and Chinese can be terrorized by the prospect of nuclear war into defeat or withdrawal.

They cannot, for three reasons. First, because (whatever the computers say) nobody believes that a United States Government, which is genuinely interested in a stable and peaceful world, will actually start a nuclear war over Vietnam. South Vietnam is a question of vital importance for Hanoi and Peking, just as Soviet missiles off Florida were regarded as a vital issue in Washington; whereas the Vietcong are merely a matter of saving face for the United States as Cuban missile bases were of marginal urgency for Khrushchev. The Russians backed down over Cuba because to them it was not worth any kind of world war, nuclear or conventional. For the same reason the United States can be expected to back down in South Vietnam, provided it is interested in world peace, and provided, presumably, some sort of
face-saving formula can be found.

Second, and on the supposition that the United States really is not prepared for any realistic settlement in South Vietnam, its nuclear threat will not work in the long run because North Vietnam, China (and quite a few other countries) will conclude that nothing is to be expected from concession except further United States demands. There is so much talk about “Munich” in Washington these days that it is often forgotten how much like Munich the situation must look to the other side. A government which regards itself as free to bomb a country with which it is not at war can hardly be surprised if China and North Vietnam refuse to believe that this is the last concession they will be asked to make. There are, as the U.S. Government is aware, situations today in which countries are willing to face the risks of world war, even nuclear war. For China and North Vietnam, South Vietnam is one such situation and the Chinese have already made that clear. It is dangerous daydreaming to think otherwise.

Third and last, the threat of nuclear war against China and North Vietnam is relatively ineffective, because it is more appropriately a threat made against industrialized belligerents. It assumes that in modern warfare there comes a moment when a country or a people must give up because its back is broken. That is a certain outcome of nuclear war for small and medium-sized industrial states and a probable one for large ones (including the United States), but it is not the necessary outcome for a relatively undeveloped state, especially one as gigantic as China. It is certainly true that China (without the USSR?) has no chance of defeating the United States. The strength of its position is that neither can it be defeated in any realistic sense. Its token nuclear bombs can be destroyed, and so can its industries, cities and many millions of its 700 million citizens. But all that would merely put the country back to where it was at the time of the Korean War. There are simply not enough Americans to conquer and occupy the country.

It is important for American generals (and for anyone else calculating war on assumptions derived from industrial societies) to realize that a nuclear threat will be regarded by the Chinese either as incredible, or as inevitable but not decisive. It will therefore not work as a threat, though doubtless the Chinese will not rush lightly into a major war, especially a nuclear one, even when they believe it cannot be avoided. As in Korea, they are not likely to enter it until directly attacked or threatened. The dilemma of American policy therefore remains. Having three times as many nuclear bombs as the rest of the world is very impressive, but it will not stop people from making revolutions of which Mr. McGeorge Bundy disapproves. Nuclear bombs cannot win guerrilla wars such as the Vietnamese are now fighting, and without such weapons it is improbable that even conventional wars can be won in that region. (The Korean War was at best a draw.) Nuclear bombs cannot be used as a threat to win a little war that is lost, or even a medium-sized war, for though the populace can be massacred, the enemy cannot be brought to surrender. If the United States can come to terms with the realities of Southeast Asia, it will find itself very much where it was before — the most formidable power in the world, whose position and influence nobody wants to challenge, if only because nobody can, but which, like all other powers, past and present, must live in a world it does not altogether like. If it cannot come to such terms, sooner or later it will blast off those missiles. The risk is that the United States, suffering from the well-known disease of infant great powers — a touch of omnipotence — will slide into nuclear war rather than face reality.

The Question of SNCC . . . . . . . . . . . Jack Newfield

The real and exact job of a cop: STOP STOP
that is also true
of executive committees
and every government and
organization in the whole world
except
small quick ones
and plain people
who love.

— Jane Stembridge
SNCC staff

More than five years have now passed since the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed during an Easter weekend conference on the campus of Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C. Since then, this battered brotherhood of organizers, poets, hipsters and visionaries has grown up to have a staff of 200 full-time paid workers in the field, plus 250 full-time volunteers; an annual budget of $800,000, and an evolving philosophy unburdened by obsolete blueprints for utopia from other generations or other countries. SNCC is simply the sum of its experiences inside the eye of the American Dilemma.

SNCC is more a chaotic movement than a conventional civil rights organization; the best image for it is that of a amoeba with pseudopods reaching out in many directions: Compared to the well-organized and disciplined Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), SNCC is a happening.

Recalling from the “cult of personality” that surrounds Martin Luth-