

Why They Fight

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What forces lie within a man that forge the will to fight? What drives a particular being into a bloody and sometimes hopeless contest of arms? Historical studies and personal accounts of leaders great and small have provided us with examples of what must be done to make soldiers fight and face death in war—conventional war.

Today, the world sees an unconventional warrior who lacks formal identification but vigorously pursues his country's apparent goals. Our forefathers knew the Apache brave, the Confederate cavalry irregular, and the Philippine revolutionary of Emilio Aguinaldo. But the effectiveness of the Vietnamese Communist fighting man, or Viet Cong, far exceeds that of any guerrilla warrior heretofore confronted by this Nation.

All phases of Viet Cong training blend political and military indoctrination. Brigadier General Samuel B. Griffith II, US Marine Corps, Retired, explains it this way:

In the United States, we go to considerable trouble to keep soldiers out of politics and even more, to keep politics out of soldiers. Guerrillas do exactly the opposite. They go to great lengths to make sure that their men are politically educated and ... aware of the issues ... [A guerrilla's] indoctrination begins even before he is taught to shoot—and



it is unceasing. The end product is an intensely loyal and politically alert fighting man.

The fusion of political and military factors reaches deep into the total guerrilla structure. To illustrate, let us study a hypothetical child of revolution who was destined to become a main force insurgent. His name is Nguyen Tho Luong or Luong for short.

Luong was born in 1932 in a small village a few kilometers west of the port city of Haiphong, North Vietnam. His environment was colonial. Everywhere the French were better dressed, better fed, and better informed of the world than he. He was taught by a French-guided school system, but, during the hot evening hours, his parents spoke of his country's history.

They covered its heritage from the earliest times—the heroic Trung sisters who led an uprising against the Chinese in A.D. 40, established a shortlived kingdom, and committed suicide on its destruction; the Chinese period; and the occupation of Vietnam by France.

They dwelt hard on the French aspect, probably since it was the most recent colonial experience, saying that someday Vietnam would be free because somehow the French would leave. They did not mind the French so much, but they did not like being occupied by them and working for them. Somehow it was not right for the French to be in the Red River Delta, but they really did not understand why all of this was so.

Luong was closely tied to his family and to his ancestors. His house was the house of his grandfather who had built it with his bare hands. His grandfather was still there, too. Luong knew that because, “A house is more than a home; it is the sanctuary for the altar of the ancestors, the place of ... rituals.”

Ancestral Influence

Throughout his early life, Luong’s primary educational and developmental contacts lay within his family and the ancestral influence. Occasionally, the French would try to change this by resettlement of certain neighbors who were partially hostile to the regime, but, by and large, the family influence prevailed. In the rapidly changing world, Luong clung to the familiar. His primary concerns were his family and his home. His world was the village in which he lived, where he would marry and probably die, and become another of the ancestral spirits who had watched over his family for centuries.

When the Japanese came to Indochina, Luong saw the French defeated and replaced by Orientals who looked something like himself. What is important is that he did not hear of it or learn of it from others; he saw it himself. He reasoned that here were new masters, and he was disturbed in 1945 when he watched the return of the French, whom he knew had not defeated these other Orientals in war. In fact, he was so disturbed that he said so one day during the afternoon siesta at the small plantation where he worked.

After the French foreman had chastised him for being a trifle slow, he muttered to the other workers:

Why are they still here? Why and how did they come back? I’m tired of seeing them about, and I wonder why we can’t get some of the good jobs on this plantation.

No one answered. The group just finished their tea and returned to work.

First Step

A week later during a similar break, an older man, Thai, approached him and asked if he really wanted to improve his lot in the world. When Luong said yes, Thai explained that if Luong would come to a meeting at Number 121 Avenue Pasteur that night he might learn more about this new future. All that was involved, Thai said, was listening to a few simple lectures by Vietnamese men just like Luong, after which he would be asked to follow some basic rules. If he did not like what he heard this night, he could leave and nothing more would be said.

His reaction was moderate. He did not understand all that had been said except that he could not forget one message about “national resistance” that was repeated over and over again: “It is time to mobilize and arm the people to rid our land of the French master.” Luong liked that. He had told Thai at the meeting that he hoped someone would get rid of that French foreman who was a bad man with a harsh tongue and had eyes in the back of his head.

Although Luong did not especially like the group’s rules, he complied reasonably well, and, when he had failed to carry them out properly, he confessed this dereliction to Thai. At first, Thai would try to help him by suggesting ways in which to improve. Later on, Thai was more stern, even threatening to report Luong to one of the speakers.

Many meetings and more rules followed. Luong learned all the rules and even brought some friends to work with Thai and attend meetings. Then one night, following another bad exchange with the foreman and fortified with some mild encouragement from Thai, Luong slashed the tires of the foreman’s car with his machete.

Although Luong feared apprehension by

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the French *gendarmerie*, somehow Duc, the houseman of the plantation owner, was charged with the crime, fined, and beaten. Luong knew and liked Duc and wanted to turn himself in, but Thai talked him out of this “silly gesture,” stating that Duc had grown rich while working for the French and had gotten what was coming to him. Besides, he was still employed inside the big house.

Instead, Thai convinced Luong that he should take another approach and attempt to convince Duc to attend the meetings. “It would be good to have one of our groups of patriots in a French house. We could learn much about what is going on,” he reasoned.

Pattern is Set

So, at 16 years of age, Luong became a revolutionary. The year was 1948. He had been lured into a revolutionary cell by a trained party worker. He had been subjected to repetitive propaganda, had engaged in self-criticism, and had caused an incident from which he was protected by the organization. He had assisted in the recruitment of several individuals, one of whom was on the “inside.” The pattern had been set. The system had spared Luong, and he now had about six years in which to prepare to join the hard-core cadre of the National Liberation Front.

During the next five years, Luong worked for the unification of Vietnam. He worked as a nationalist to unite a “downtrodden people” to resist oppression.

Although Luong is a hypothetical person, the following passage is an extract from the diary of Do Luc, a Viet Cong soldier who was killed at Dak Trum in late 1961. Luong could have been this soldier:

I answered the call of the Party when I was very young and what did I do for the people of my village? I devoted myself to the people. I took part in propaganda and aroused the people to carry out the policy of the [Lao Dong] Party and the Government and helped organize village defense and fighting forces. On March 25, 1954, I began my fighting career and I contributed my part in fighting the French. ... With the Army of Interzone 5, I saw the end of the war on July 20, 1954, and then on April 26, 1955 I left ... to go North as a victorious fighter. Since that day, my spirit has matured together with that of the regular army.

This, then, was the story of the transformation of Luong, a personal history based on what happened to

many young Vietnamese. It demonstrates how early indoctrination gives way to political indoctrination and clears the way to main force status.

Motivational Factors

To help determine those factors which motivate the main force Viet Cong, I solicited by questionnaire the views of 147 Americans and Vietnamese who served in or had been associated with the Vietnam operation. Of the replies received, 76 percent were furnished by officers and enlisted men from sergeant through general; 13 percent were from selected Government personnel, including one former Ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam; and 11 percent came from others, including General Nguyen Khanh and certain US press representatives and allied officials.

From a list of 15 items, addressees were asked to select three factors which best explained the motivation of the Viet Cong. The list included:

1. Communist ideology. (A truly dedicated product of the international Communist movement.)
2. Communist propaganda. (Not a dedicated Communist, but strongly influenced by propaganda.)
3. Nationalism. (Loyalty and devotion to a nation; really believes in the unification of Vietnam under North Vietnamese rule.)
4. Hatred of the United States.
5. Hatred of the present Republic of Vietnam Government.
6. The spirit of adventure.
7. Personal economic gain.
8. Effectiveness of his leaders.
9. Personal political gain.
10. A desire to remedy longstanding (historical) grievances.
11. Cultural heritage.
12. Racism. (A belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.)
13. Xenophobia.
14. The Viet Cong are not highly motivated, and there is no significant motivational factor worth mentioning.
15. Other.



Addressees were further asked to comment on Viet Cong “willingness to close with and destroy the enemy” and to discuss exploitable weaknesses.

Predominant Reasons

The questionnaire results offer depth of data and professional opinion and are confirmed by other studies. The motivational factors named most frequently were:

- ◆ Communist propaganda. There were 49 choices for this factor, by far the most frequently selected. Opinions were nearly unanimous that propaganda which contains the “big promise” never openly admitted that the Viet Cong were Communists. On the other hand, it strongly implied, by envisioning future conditions of freedom and unification, that the end was in sight. This technique is well described by one officer who wrote:

They [the Democratic Republic of Vietnam] offer a promise, a dream of land, of fair treatment, of a non-corrupt, unified government. Thus they gain another recruit who is far from being a Communist and really doesn't even know what the word ... means. After joining the Viet Cong the propaganda doesn't cease but rather it is intensified.

In addition to the long-range cure, the “promise” also offers the immediate reward. This is done regionally or locally and is skillfully tailored to fit grievances which are applicable to the target group. These immediate themes are not always economic or political but may be directed to the ego, racial or religious prejudices, sexual drive, even spirit of adventure and, particularly, group loyalties. Thus, selective, tailored propaganda, driven home by a host of repetitious techniques, emerges as a significant motivating factor of the main force Viet Cong.

- ◆ Effectiveness of his leaders. Chosen 38 times, this factor ranked second in importance. The words which most frequently appeared in the answers were “effective,” “dedicated,” “experienced,” and the “product of the law of survival.” The ability to combine leadership techniques and discipline were often mentioned as being characteristic of the Viet Cong leader in the field.

Several extracts are worth repeating. Tran Van Dinh wrote that:

More than anything else they [the Viet Cong] know how to combine persuasion with terror, administration with oppression, democratic practices with strong party discipline.



A Viet Cong patrol crosses a jungle stream.

General Nguyen Khanh referred to their “scientific system” and the fact that leader selection is “very strict and delicate.” In explanation of this “scientific system,” General Paul D. Harkins, US Army, Retired, identified the leaders as “the proven hard core” who have ascended “the ladder proving devotion to the cause. They have so many hidden agents one has to be careful to live.” An experienced senior noncommissioned officer had this to say:

The VC is commanded by a leader that has proven himself ... capable by the fact that he has survived. He is, in most cases, prepared to do whatever is necessary to carry out his mission of ultimate victory. ... It has been my experience that he has been able to influence his troops by a balanced use of propaganda, hatred, terrorism and the many traits of any good leader. Generally, the average rank and file has no strong convictions to the cause but is held in line by strong leadership, these leaders being promoted through the ranks by their proven abilities.

The “why” of leader effectiveness lies in the adage, “Success breeds success,” clearly identifying the Viet Cong movement as a continuation of the successful Viet Minh campaign of 1954.

- ◆ Nationalism and personal gain. The actual counting of selections was discontinued here since most replies considered economic or political gain to fall in the realm of “personal gain.” The consensus was that the nationalism factor was a manifestation of effective propaganda. It is seen in the word Vietnam, as opposed to North or South Vietnam, and lies in the principle of reunification through continuation of another phase of

the Indochina War. David Halberstam, American war correspondent, spoke of the application of the nationalism factor as:

... the idea of driving the white colonial ruler out; the Viet Minh were [thus] identified ... and it was a very popular force. There is some xenophobia and race here, but I think it is primarily the legacy of the colonial war, the second step ... and they have been very successful in making it appear as though it is all one war, that there has never been a break and that the sides and forces have not changed.

The “personal gain” factor covers the entire spectrum of either long or short-term political, economic, military, or social advancement. Anything to improve his lot is considered “gain” by the Viet Cong, and this is carried as a significant motivating factor. An Army educator described the gain factor:

The Viet Cong movement seems to offer the common man a chance for political participation, economic betterment, social equality, rewards according to merit and

identification with the nationalist struggle. We suffer from the misfortune of appearing to be the successors to the French colonial regime.

Therefore, when one has little or nothing, “gain” by the Viet Cong interpretation will be a motivating factor.

- Other factors. Hatred, long grievances, racism, xenophobia, and adventure were all occasionally selected as motivational factors, but analysis always revealed them as broad manifestations of either the propaganda or nationalism themes employed by effective, understanding leaders operating close to the people. Desire for group identification was listed along with security, fear, and terrorism. But again, the analysis led back to the three leading factors. Communist ideology was not a significant motivating factor other than being the force which has developed the propaganda that has emerged as the primary weapon of this conflict.

The questionnaire consensus clearly indicated the willingness of the Viet Cong “to close with and destroy the enemy,” but only when victory is reasonably assured. This was repeatedly pointed out as accepted guerrilla doctrine. Several replies declared “deep respect” for this trait and described the Viet Cong as “tenacious” and “able,” especially when well commanded. On the other hand, there was the inference that his fighting ability is “exaggerated” and “overrated”; that his mission is not to close but only to harry and tire his foe, always avoiding decisive engagement.

Former US Ambassador to Vietnam, Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., remarked:

While this question can be answered better by those who have been in combat, my own impression is that the VC were generally willing to ‘close’ only when the tactical situation was very favorable to them, otherwise not. Also, I think their objective was not so much to ‘destroy the enemy’ as to demoralize him, weaken him, and destroy his will to resist. In other words, theirs is a political as much as military objective.

Ambassador Nolting’s remarks were complemented by a statement on leadership from a former corps G3 advisor:

This willingness varies directly with the Viet Cong’s tactical chances for success. Viet Cong units will not normally close unless chances for success are in their favor. Therefore this willingness is closely related to the judgement and experience of small unit leaders. This is another expression of the importance of effective leadership.



Selective tailored propaganda is the most significant motivating factor of the Viet Cong.

Again, the subject of leadership returns. The answer given by Colonel Serong, Chief of the Australian Army Training Team in Vietnam, is applicable here and to any army:

What makes a soldier fight? If one may omit the arrant conscript who goes into battle with the Sergeant Major’s gun at his back, the answer is the same for all soldiers. The soldier fights because he is one of a group of a dozen men, and the most precious thing in his life is the esteem in which he is held by the other eleven. This desire for esteem can be harnessed. ... This act of harnessing ... and

directing it to a military target is called leadership. ... The VC leadership is excellent. It comes from, understands and is identified with the peasantry from whom the VG battalions are raised. The GVN leadership is lousy. It comes from the Saigonnaise Bourgeoisie, who neither understand nor want to understand the peasantry from whom their battalion is raised.

This analysis develops the thesis that the Viet Cong's "willingness to close with and destroy" is a function of the commander's ability to impose his will on his unit in action. When the commander has demonstrated his ability to command and win—when he has, for example, accomplished the required groundwork for battle with marked emphasis on a successful outcome—his guerrilla subordinates will display that confidence in him which is essential for success in war. They will follow, and they will close to kill.

In the event of faulty planning or intelligence resulting in a poor estimation of the odds, they will function and perform in direct proportion to the type of leader they deem him to be. If he is competent, they will remain to conquer, withdraw in order, or die. If he is marginal, they will deteriorate rapidly, perhaps more rapidly than comparable conventional forces. If he has simply been lucky (and this is sometimes the case), the final reckoning is only deferred, and the leader will either be replaced or defeated.

These remarks extracted from a portion of the questionnaires are aptly summarized by a statement of another soldier from another war, General George S. Patton, Jr.:

Wars may be fought with weapons but they are won by men. It is the spirit of the men who follow and of the man who leads that gains the victory.

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