



FORSVARSAKADEMIET

## BRIEF

# **Overwhelming Force - A Persistent Concept in US Military Thinking**

From the American Civil War to Vietnam

By Philip Chr. Ulrich, M.A. in American Studies

## **BRIEF**

# **Overwhelming Force - A Persistent Concept in US Military Thinking**

From the American Civil War to Vietnam

By Philip Chr. Ulrich, M.A. in American Studies

Institute for Strategy - [ifs@fak.dk](mailto:ifs@fak.dk)

Royal Danish Defence College • Ryvangs Allé 1 • DK-2100 Copenhagen East

*The Royal Danish Defence College is the Danish armed forces' powerhouse for education, training and research-generated consultancy. Our research is conducted within a broad range of military-related topics. Our research priorities, such as topics and resource allocation are determined by the Commandant of the Royal Danish Defence College, who is aided by a research council.*

*Research at the Royal Danish Defence College should enlighten and challenge the reader, whether they are in the armed forces or in the surrounding environment. This is only achievable if the employees have the freedom to administer their own research projects and draw their own conclusions. This is a principle, which is honoured at the Royal Danish Defence College.*

*We hope you enjoy reading the Royal Danish Defence College's publications!*

© Royal Danish Defence College

All rights reserved. Mechanical, photographic or other reproduction or photocopying from this book or parts thereof is only allowed according to agreements between The Danish Defence and CopyDan.

Any other use without written consent from the Royal Danish Defence College is illegal according to Danish law on intellectual property right. Excepted are short extracts for reviews in newspapers or the like.

Copenhagen December 2012  
Royal Danish Defence College  
Ryvangs Allé 1  
DK-2100 Copenhagen  
Denmark  
Phone: +45 3915 1515  
Fax: +45 3929 6172  
Editor: Director of the Institute for Strategy Ole Kværnø  
Layout by B-O. Kure  
ISBN: 978-87-7147-008-6

Royal Danish Defence College Publishing House

## Introduction

Following the 2006 publication of the US Army's first counterinsurgency (COIN) manual, FM 3-24, COIN became the new buzzword under the leadership of the so-called COINdinitas, led by General David H. Petraeus. COIN became the basis for a new approach to the situation in Iraq with a surge of troops and a population-centric focus.

The strict adherence to COIN that followed the publication of FM 3-24 was a very significant change in US military thinking. The application of overwhelming force had been a cornerstone in the way that the US Army waged war throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, the new adherence to the softer population-centric approach dictated by COIN was a significant break with a deep-rooted organizational understanding within the US Army of how wars should be fought.

In his book *The Army and Vietnam* Andrew Krepinevich coined the term the "Army Concept". This term was used in his book to describe the US Army's basic approach to war when fighting the Vietnam War. Krepinevich stated, "The characteristics of the Army Concept are two: a focus on mid-intensity, or conventional, war and a reliance on high volumes of firepower to minimize casualties – in effect, the substitution of material costs at every available opportunity to avoid payment in blood."<sup>1</sup>

This approach to war was, according to Krepinevich, the reason why the US Army was unable to grasp the COIN operations that were necessary to succeed in Vietnam. The Army Concept continued to influence the US Army after the end of the Vietnam War, reinforced by the perception in the entire US military that focus on COIN was the reason why the US had lost in Vietnam. COIN was intentionally forgotten within the US Army, and focus was moved exclusively to conventional technology-centric warfare. But from where did the Army Concept evolve? This brief is the first in a series of briefs tracing the origins of the Army Concept back to the American Civil War and what in this series will be called the "Civil War Concept". The following briefs will analyze the continued influence of the Army Concept and lessons taken from the Vietnam War.

The Civil War Concept was characterized by a reliance on the superiority in manpower and material that the Union enjoyed. Further, it was characterized by the recognition of two centers of gravity in the Confederacy. They were the Confederate armies and the Confederate population. General Ulysses S. Grant recognized the necessity of pursuing the Confederate armies, as he saw them as the key to breaking the Confederacy. On the other hand, General William T. Sherman saw the population as the key to breaking the Confederacy's ability to continue the war.

This brief will analyze the emergence of, the subsequent development of and the adherence to the concept of overwhelming force in US military thinking. It traces

---

(1) Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 5

---

the evolution from the origins in the American Civil War, through the changes of the Korean War up to the Vietnam War.

There are several reasons why an analysis of the concept of overwhelming force is interesting. Firstly, it is interesting because the adherence to the application of overwhelming force, and the fascination of technology as a force multiplier, was arguably a main reason for the defeat in the Vietnam War and for the deteriorating situation in Iraq following the invasion of 2003. Although it is not a unique concept for the United States, it has had a major impact on the most controversial wars in US history. The default reliance on material, firepower, and technology led to an inability of the US Army to understand the nature of the conflict in which it was committed. This was the case in Vietnam, as well as in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Secondly, the analysis shows how the concept of overwhelming force became deeply ingrained in the organizational memory of the US Army through more than 150 years, and this in turn explains why the turn to the COIN doctrine from 2006 was such a significant adaptation

Thirdly, the development shows how an organization, just like human beings, chooses its lessons learned based on its established knowledge.<sup>2</sup> The lessons learned from the Civil War by the US Army were institutionalized after the war, and the subsequent experiences of the US Army have been fitted into the existing concept instead of adapting the concept to the situations facing the United States. Thus the US Army's concept of overwhelming force came to dominate US Army thinking from the Civil War onwards, despite the fact that with the invention of nuclear weapons the nature of war changed to limit the level of conflict out of fear of nuclear escalation.

## **The American Civil War**

### Failing to grasp the war

In November 1861 Major General George B. McClellan took command of all Union forces in an effort by President Lincoln to coordinate the Union armies in order to defeat the Confederacy. McClellan's idea was to attack the Confederacy on several fronts in order to spread out the limited Confederate forces and defeat them one by one. General McClellan wanted to outmaneuver the Confederacy while sparing the Confederate civilian population as much as possible, but he proved unwilling to commit his resources and suffer the casualties that eventually proved necessary to wear down the Confederacy. At the same time General McClellan saw the capture of

---

(2) For an analysis of organizational knowledge/learning and its influence on organizational decision-making, see the organizational behavior model in: Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision. Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Longman, 1999)  
Also see: James P. Walsh and Gerardo Rivera Ungson, "Organizational Memory", *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Jan. 1991), pp. 63-67

geographical locations as being the key to defeating the Confederacy. How Generals Grant and Sherman differed will be discussed later.

General McClellan's plans proved unable to break the Confederacy; firstly because he was too cautious in his maneuvers, basing his campaigns on his own exaggerated estimates of enemy troop levels. Secondly, his plan failed because he failed to identify what the Joint Staff's *Doctrine for Joint Operations 3-0* would define as the Confederacy's "center of gravity"<sup>3</sup>.

Following the Battle of Antietam in September 1862, which had effectively ended in a Union success despite heavy losses on both sides, General McClellan failed to pursue General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia. Because of McClellan's continued timidity, President Lincoln relieved General McClellan of his command of the combined Union armies and also of the Army of the Potomac, which was the principal Union army on the East Coast.

The new Commander in Chief of all Union armies was General Henry Halleck who had commanded an army in the Western theater before coming to Washington. However, General Halleck failed to coordinate Union efforts due to various personal, military, and political factors, which meant that no concerted Union efforts were made against the Confederate armies. Following General McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac came a series of generals who all failed to inflict a substantial defeat on General Lee.

General Lee was defeated in the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, but because General George G. Meade failed to pursue Lee's battered army, the chance to deal a decisive blow against Lee slipped through his fingers.

The major shortcomings of the Union generals of the early part of the Civil War were that they failed to realize the kind of enemy they were facing. The Union generals of that period saw the conflict as a conflict in which battle field victory and conquest of territory would be sufficient to break the enemy. However, the entire Southern society was involved in sustaining the Confederate armies, and therefore it would not be sufficient to outmaneuver and defeat the Confederate armies. It would require a complete subjection of the entire Southern population to break the Confederate will to fight.

It was General Grant's and General Sherman's realization of the two previously mentioned centers of gravity that would lead to a defeat of the Confederacy: the Confederate armies and the Southern population.

---

(3) US Department of Defense, *Doctrine for Joint Operations 3-0* (Washington D.C., 2001), p. GL-5

### Breaking the Confederate armies

Already in the spring of 1862 President Lincoln stated what he saw as the way to break the Confederacy. He stated that “my general idea of this war to be that we have the greater numbers, and the enemy has the greater facility of concentrating forces upon points of collision; that we must fail, unless we can find some way of making our advantage an over-match for his; and that this can only be done by menacing him with *superior* forces at *different* points, at the *same* time.” (Italics added)<sup>4</sup>

The flaw in General McClellan and his successors was explained by President Lincoln following the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862. Although the battle was a Union defeat with heavy Union losses, Lincoln commented that “if the same battle were to be fought over again, every day, through a week of days, with the same relative results, the army under Lee would be wiped out to its last man, the Army of the Potomac would still be a mighty host, the war would be over, the Confederacy gone. No general yet found can face the arithmetic, but the end of the war will be at hand when he shall be discovered.”<sup>5</sup>

So what Lincoln had realized was that the superiority in numbers that the Union enjoyed could be used to wear down the Confederacy as it did not have the same reserves to draw on as the Union had. The Union generals in the early stages of the Civil War could not “face the arithmetic”, but General Grant was willing to do just that, as he took command of all Union armies in March 1864.

In a letter written in March 1864, General Grant stated his strategy for defeating the Confederacy:

*I therefore determined first, to use the greatest number of troops practicable against the armed force of the enemy, preventing him from using the same force at different seasons against first one and then another of our armies, and the possibility of repose for refitting and producing necessary supplies for carrying on resistance; second, to hammer continuously against the armed force of the enemy and his resources, until by mere attrition, if in no other way, there should be nothing left to him but an equal submission with the loyal section of our common country to the constitution and laws of the land.*<sup>6</sup>

General Grant’s unrelenting approach to the war against the Confederacy earned him the nickname Ulysses “Unconditional Surrender” Grant, and this was exactly the kind of general that President Lincoln had been looking for.

---

(4) Donald Stoker, *The Grand Design. Strategy and the U.S. Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 79

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 218

(6) *Ibid.*, pp. 351-352

General Grant's philosophy represented a change in the Civil War. Previously, the two armies would retire or at least halt in order to regroup after each battle. This was not the way that General Grant wanted to fight the Confederacy.

An example of this came following the Battle of the Wilderness, which was really a stalemate between General Grant's and General Lee's armies. The orders for the Army of the Potomac were not to retire and regroup, but rather that it should pursue General Lee's army in order to keep it off balance and wear it down.

General Grant kept to his policy of "hammering continuously" at the Confederate forces using his superior numbers to limit the Confederacy's ability to maneuver and to inflict heavy casualties on the enemy, which they were unable to replace.

General Grant's strategy paid off as General Lee was forced to surrender on April 9<sup>th</sup> 1865 at Appomattox Court House, because his forces were so depleted and he had no possibility of resupplying, and because he was caught between overwhelming Union forces.

In short, General Grant changed the way that the Union waged war through his willingness to apply the overwhelming manpower and material of the Union, while at the same time being willing to sustain the consequent casualties. His ability to coordinate the Union armies, his willingness to sustain casualties, and his focus on the Confederate armies as the centers of gravity for the Confederacy was what set him apart from his predecessors.

Of relevance to this brief, General Grant's ideas of warfare laid the foundation of the Civil War Concept, the application of overwhelming force to defeat an enemy. General William T. Sherman would take this new way of thinking and make it come to life, as he led a campaign through the heart of the Confederacy and broke the backbone of the Confederate infrastructure and their will to fight.

### **Fighting a New Kind of War**

General Sherman broke ground in another area where the Civil War deviated from other wars in which the United States had been involved until then. General Sherman realized that it would not be sufficient to defeat the Confederate armies; the Confederate population would also have to be kept from sustaining their forces. In other words, General Sherman saw the Southern population as another center of gravity that had to be hit in order to break the Confederacy. Already in October 1862 General Sherman stated:

*We know that all the South is in arms and deep in enmity, and we know that every man available for war in the North should now be in motion. We cannot change the hearts of those people of the South, but we can make war so terrible that they will realize the fact that, however brave and gallant and devoted to their country, still*

---

*they are mortal and should exhaust all peaceful remedies before they fly to war. This is all I hope for, and even this will take time and vast numbers.*<sup>7</sup>

General Sherman's idea was to use the superiority of the Union to break the will of the Southern population to make them lose faith in the Confederate cause and therefore end the war. The reason why General Sherman's idea was so effective was that the demographic conditions in the Confederacy meant that the entire Confederate population had to be involved somehow in sustaining the war efforts, either through enlistment or logistical support. General Sherman therefore aimed his campaigns of late 1864 at hitting this center of gravity in order to break the will of the Confederate population, as well as taking away the supplies of the Confederate armies. This was the aim of his "Great March to the Sea".

General Sherman saw the Confederate population as closely connected with the Confederate armies as can also be seen in his Special Field Order No. 120 point 5, issued on November 9<sup>th</sup> 1864, as his army began its march from Atlanta towards the Atlantic coast. The order went:

*To army corps commanders alone is entrusted the power to destroy mills, houses, cotton-gins &, and for them this general principal is laid down: In districts and neighborhood where the army is unmolested no destruction of such property should be permitted; but should guerillas or bushwackers molest our march, or should the inhabitants burn bridges, obstruct roads, or otherwise manifest local hostility, then army commanders should order and enforce a devastation more or less relentless according to the measure of such hostility.*<sup>8</sup>

This order shows how closely General Sherman linked the Confederate population and army. If the Confederate armies or guerillas conducted operations in an attempt to stop the Union army, then General Sherman saw the local population as complicit as they had not stopped the efforts of the Confederate forces.

The Union army under General Sherman that marched from Atlanta to Savannah destroyed the region's infrastructure and production facilities and defeated the Confederate forces in the area, which helped break the will of the Confederacy to continue the war.

The combination of General Grant's strategy of relentless attacks on the Confederate armies and General Sherman's strike on the Confederate heartland and his destruction of the region's infrastructure and production facilities proved to be a winning recipe.

---

(7) Ibid., p. 208

(8) *Special Field Order No. 120*, November 9<sup>th</sup> 1864

<http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/cac/ms/trans/page54637.html>

The strategy implemented by the two generals was what this brief has called the Civil War Concept, and this would continue to influence the US Army for a little less than a century and a half until the US Army was forced to adapt to the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The concept prescribed a reliance on superiority in manpower and material which would overwhelm the enemy by force.

### **The Continued Influence of the Civil War Concept**

In the post-Civil War period the US Army focused on its operations against Native Americans on the Western Frontiers, which meant a physical isolation of the US Army from American society and therefore also from civilian influence.

Under the leadership of General Sherman from 1869-1883 and General Philip Sheridan from 1883-1888, the US Army institutionalized its ideas of warfare through the establishment of a military education system and an increased number of military journals, which enabled the officers of the US Army to share their ideas of warfare with each other. Another major influence on the intellectual development of the US Army in this period was Brevet Major General Emory Upton, who was himself very influenced by the Prussian military system, which he studied on a tour of Europe.

Upton's fascination with the Prussian military staff system and its independence of direct civilian leadership had a subsequent influence on the intellectual thinking of the US Army, as his ideas of a military operating independently in times of war came to influence the US Army from then on. At the same time US military thinking in that period was influenced by Generals Sherman and Philip Sheridan as Commanding Generals of the Army, which meant that the Civil War Concept was institutionalized and became the foundational concept of American warfare in this period.<sup>9</sup>

When the United States became involved in World War I, the contribution that the United States could provide to the Allies in Europe proved a deciding factor. The industrial capabilities of the United States were activated for war, and fresh manpower was sent to the Western Front to bolster the Allied fronts.

The US contribution to the war effort was too short to allow any substantial analysis of the conceptual thinking of the US military at that time. It can, however, be argued that the industrial and material superiority of the United States was instrumental in the Allied victory, and it can therefore in some respects be seen as a continuation of the primary point of the Civil War Concept, the application of superior manpower and material in order to overwhelm the enemy. Looking at the general military thinking of both the Allies and Central Powers of the time, we see that the concept

---

(9) For an excellent analysis of the influence of General Sherman and Major General Upton on the ideas of the US Army on civil-military relations and war fighting concepts, see: Russell F. Weigley, *Towards an American Army. Military Thought from Washington to Marshall*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1962) pp. 79-161; and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State. The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 222-270

---

of applying overwhelming force was a common feature of the military strategies of World War I.

The industrial capabilities of the United States once again made it possible to apply its concept of overwhelming the enemy with manpower and material.

The US strategy in World War II bears greater resemblance with the Civil War Concept. Once again the material and industrial superiority of the United States tipped the balance of power in favor of the Allied Powers. As during the Civil War, the Allied war efforts in World War II had two general focus points, the Axis armies and the Axis population.

General Grant's strategy of attrition was pursued as the Allied armies overwhelmed the German and Japanese armies with their superiority in manpower and material. This superiority enabled the Allies to engage the Axis Powers on several fronts, thus stretching the limited resources of the Axis Powers to the breaking point. The US contribution to the direct combat operations against Germany was distributed on two fronts, with the direct purpose of knocking Germany out of the war first, so that US efforts could be focused on Japan.

General Sherman's emphasis on the enemy population as a center of gravity was also copied in World War II by the Allies.

The strategic bombings of German cities were of course also a matter of revenge from a British perspective, but the bombings were aimed at breaking the will of the German people to continue the war and at limiting the German production facilities. The same objective was pursued in the Pacific theater, as Japanese cities were leveled as part of the American strategic bombing campaign. Just as General Sherman's campaign across the Confederacy had the aim of minimizing the war fighting capabilities of the enemy, so the US bombing campaigns against Germany and Japan had the aim of limiting their war fighting capabilities – and thus supporting the tactical efforts of the Allied armies on the Western front.

The ultimate demand for unconditional surrender set by the Allies was presented by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt at the Casablanca summit. To explain the doctrine of unconditional surrender, President Roosevelt explained that the idea came to him during negotiations when he remembered General Grant's policy towards the Confederacy. So in a very concrete way the experiences of the Civil War influenced even the highest levels of US foreign policy during World War II.<sup>10</sup>

The continued influence of the Civil War Concept can thus be seen in the way that the United States once again contributed to the war effort by being able to pour massive quantities of manpower and material into the Allied war efforts, and in the conditions set by the Allies for ending the war.

---

(10) Anne Armstrong, *Unconditional Surrender. The Impact of the Casablanca Policy Upon World War II*, (Rutgers University Press, 1961), pp. 12-15

The technological advances that had happened up to and during World War II enabled the destructive campaigns to move to a larger scale than imagined by General Grant or General Sherman, but the basic philosophy behind the strategy pursued in World War II has its origins in the lessons learnt from the Civil War.

The technological advances were not, however, occurring on one side alone, as the Axis powers were also developing their own technologies and thus were very much on the same technological level as the Allies. Therefore technology could not yet be used as a force-multiplier, as we will see was done later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore the strategy of attrition was still based on superiority in manpower and material.

### A Change in Concept

The Korean War inaugurated a new era in US warfare. Every war that the United States has fought since the end of World War II has been what Robert Endicott Osgood called “Limited Wars”. These new wars were limited in nature in order to avoid the war escalating into a nuclear war between the superpowers of the time.

Osgood defined a limited war as: “one in which the belligerents restrict the purposes for which they fight to concrete, well-defined objectives that do not demand the utmost military effort of which the belligerents are capable and that can be accommodated in a negotiated settlement.” Another aspect of limited wars is that: “It demands of the belligerents only a fractional commitment of their human and physical resources. It permits their economic, social, and political patterns of existence to continue without serious disruption.”<sup>11</sup> The first conflict of this kind was the Korean War. The new kind of warfare required the individual nation to “place artificial restraints on the conduct of war to preclude it from escalating into more total war, nuclear war.”<sup>12</sup>

Because the objectives were limited, the resources committed to the conflicts were nowhere near the same as in the previous conflicts.

Rather than accept and adapt to the new conditions, the US military, and the US Army in particular, continued to think in accordance with its concept of overwhelming force that had been so successful for all branches of the military during World War II. The concept was changed, however, by shifting the reliance on manpower to a reliance on firepower as a force-multiplier. The US Army continued to think in massive firepower and manpower as the solution to its conflicts. It would not accept the politically imposed restrictions on the scope of operations, but wanted to be given a free hand to apply its concept, securing a total victory over the enemy.

---

(11) Robert Endicott Osgood, *Limited War. The Challenge to American Strategy*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 1-2

(12) Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War. The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom*, (Routledge, 2007), p. 203

Thus we see the birth of Krepinevich's Army Concept, when the basic concept became a reliance on material and firepower superiority.

The stalemate in which the Korean War ended meant that within the US military a "Never-Again Club" arose, which wanted to avoid a repetition of the Korean stalemate and saw the limited nature of the Korean conflict as a reason for the result. Instead they preferred what Osgood termed as an "Unlimited War". This meant a conflict that is "fought with every means available in order to achieve ends that are without objective limits or that are limited only by the capacity of the belligerents to destroy the enemy's ability to resist."<sup>13</sup>

The main sentiment of the newly arisen "Never-Again Club" was that "the United States should not intervene in that region unless it was prepared to fight an all-out war, with the level of national commitment and mobilization necessary to accomplish the mission before public support eroded."<sup>14</sup>

One of the most prominent opponents of the political restrictions put on the US military was General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, who said at his speech to Congress following his removal from command in Korea: "But once war is forced upon us, there is no other alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end. War's very object is victory, not prolonged indecision. In war there is no substitute for victory."<sup>15</sup>

The first encounter of the US Army with limited wars did not result in a revision of the concept, but instead the failure in Korea was blamed on the failure to follow the concept to the end.

In 1954, when French forces were being pushed back in Indochina, the United States was considering committing forces to support them. The opinion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time was very much colored by the "Never-Again Club", as their analysis of mid-May 1954 stated: "Indochina is devoid of decisive military objectives and the allocation of more than token U.S. armed forces in Indochina would be a serious diversion of limited U.S. capabilities."<sup>16</sup>

The Kennedy administration wanted the US Army to focus on supporting the South Vietnamese government with advisors specialized in COIN doctrine. Advisors had already been dispatched under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, but under Presi-

---

(13) Robert Endicott Osgood, *Limited War. The Challenge to American Strategy*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 2

(14) David H. Petraeus, "Korea, the Never-Again Club, and Indochina", *Parameters*, December 1987, pp. 62-63

(15) General Douglas MacArthur's Farewell Address to Congress, delivered on April 19<sup>th</sup> 1951 <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/douglasmacarthurfarewelladdress.htm>

(16) David H. Petraeus, *The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam: A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era* (Ph.D. dissertation presented at Princeton University, 1987), p. 58

dent Kennedy the focus of the administration came to be very much on the COIN doctrine.

Despite the fact that the US Army as a whole paid lip service to COIN doctrine, the number of advisors grew in South Vietnam during the early 1960s, deepening the US involvement.

Already before President Kennedy came into office, the “Never-Again Club” was reversed as the top US military commanders had begun to “see America and their institutions as having a stake in the survival of Vietnam.”<sup>17</sup>

From February 1962 when US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) became operational, the size and nature of US involvement became bigger and more conventional. The sentiments of the top US military commanders against COIN was expressed very well by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1964-1970, General Earle Wheeler when he said: “It is fashionable in some quarters to say that the problems in Southeast Asia are primarily political and economic rather than military. I do not agree. The essence of the problem in Vietnam is military.”<sup>18</sup>

This sentiment was the principal reason why the US Army waged the war in Vietnam the way it did. The Army Concept, which the Civil War Concept had evolved into, had continued to influence the thinking of the US Army and therefore also determined the way that the US Army fought the Vietnam War.

When fighting the Vietnam War, the US Army used body counts as a measure of how successful the war was being fought. Basically, the US Army was trying to reach a point when the number of enemies killed exceeded the willingness of the enemy population and government to continue the war. The way to achieve this point was seen as the “mass application of firepower, as in Korea and World War II,” which the US Army felt was, “the most efficient method of generating an enemy body count while minimizing U.S. casualties.”<sup>19</sup> So basically, the US approach to the war in Vietnam was the same as General Sherman’s to the Union war against the Confederacy. In this regard, the previously quoted Field Order 120 might as well have been issued during the Vietnam War as during the Civil War.

General Westmoreland, Commander of MACV, relied on so-called “search-and-destroy” missions to engage and destroy enemy units in sufficient numbers to pursue his war of attrition. These search-and-destroy missions were based on infantry units going into the terrain and then calling in airpower or artillery to destroy the enemy forces that were found. The basic conduct of search-and-destroy missions

---

(17) Ibid., p. 78

(18) John Nagl, “Counterinsurgency in Vietnam”, in Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (eds.), *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare* (Osprey Publishing, 2008), p. 134

(19) Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 197

was explained by General William DePuy in 1973 as “the infantry found the enemy and the artillery and the air killed the enemy.”<sup>20</sup>

This strategy is a clear example of the influence of the Army Concept on the type of operations conducted by the US Army in Vietnam. Rather than put US personnel in too great risk, the strategy relied on the infantry as forward observers for the air forces and artillery.

From a conventional point of view the war in Vietnam was a series of tactical successes, but these successes were useless in the war in Vietnam because from a COIN perspective the tactical successes were counterproductive. This was what the US Army failed to realize, which led to a strategic defeat.

It was not only the Army Concept which influenced the conduct of the war in Vietnam. The Civil War Concept also continued to influence the operational approach of the US Air Force to the war over North Vietnam, which was aimed against the will of the enemy population, like General Sherman’s campaign in the Civil War. In 1966 General Maxwell Taylor explained the aim of the US air campaign, “Operation Rolling Thunder”, to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations:

*The (...) reason for the decision to use our airpower was to provide a sobering reminder to the leaders of Hanoi that progressively they must pay a mounting price for the continuation of their support of the Viet Cong insurgency. In spite of their defiant statements of determination to endure these attacks forever, I for one know from experience that no one derives any enjoyment from receiving incoming shells and bombs day after day, and I have no doubt that the warning message is getting through to the leadership of Hanoi.*<sup>21</sup>

That way the Civil War Concept influenced the conduct of the US war in Vietnam, both part of the original concept and also more specifically the new Army Concept.

A primary reason for the US defeat in Vietnam was the preference of the US Army to conduct conventional operations, relying on the Army Concept and the consequent reliance on overwhelming force. This preference led to unwillingness in the US Army to commit resources to projects such as the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups, which began as a CIA operation but was transferred to MACV command and thereafter dismantled, and the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, which also did not receive much attention from MACV. These projects were under prioritized because General Westmoreland and MACV saw them as an unnecessary diversion of resources away from the conventional operations.

---

(20) Ibid., p. 197

(21) Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War. The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom*, (Routledge, 2007), p. 244

---

## **Conclusion**

The lessons taken from the Civil War led to a reliance on an application of overwhelming force, which in this brief has been called the Civil War Concept. The enemy armies and population were seen as centers of gravity that had to be attacked. Especially seeing the enemy population as a center of gravity was different from previous military thinking.

The Civil War Concept, the reliance on overwhelming superiority in manpower and material, continued to influence military thinking during World War I and World War II when the overwhelming industrial capabilities of the United States and the superior manpower of the Allied powers eventually overwhelmed the Axis powers.

As nuclear weapons came to be a defining element of warfare, a new kind of war arose – limited wars. The aim of limited wars was to achieve political aims without risking escalating the conflict to a state of nuclear war, therefore the aims and resources committed to such conflicts were restricted. Korea became the first example of the new kind of war. Rather than adapt its military thinking to a more restrained approach, the US military took the lessons from Korea that the United States should never again fight a limited war, and that the reason for the failure in Korea was that it had not been allowed to fight according to its own concept.

Despite the aversion to limited wars, the United States became involved in a limited war in Vietnam, but rather than accept the conditions in Vietnam and the limited nature of the conflict, the US Army fought the war as though it was a conventional full scale conflict through a continued reliance on overwhelming force. The reason for this continued reliance on the Civil War Concept was that the US Army had taken those lessons from the Civil War to heart and institutionalized them, and subsequently they were confirmed through two world wars. Therefore the US Army saw no need to adapt its military thinking, as the established thinking had been so successful. The Civil War Concept with its reliance on manpower and material superiority had by this time transformed into the Army Concept, replacing manpower with a reliance on massive firepower. This Army Concept and the way that the US military refused to accept the nature of the war in Vietnam were the reasons for the US defeat in Vietnam.

