

The Enemy ... In Vietnam



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Viet Cong mount an attack in the Delta.

A COMMAND INFORMATION ANALYSIS OF THE BOOK, "PEOPLE'S WAR, PEOPLE'S ARMY," BY GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP, MINISTER OF DEFENSE, NORTH VIETNAM

The book, **People's War, People's Army**, is a collection of essays written by General Vo Nguyen Giap and published under a single title in 1961.

The quality of the essays, as a contribution to military thought, is low. However, they are important because they provide us with some clues to the outlook of General Giap, Minister of Defense of North Vietnam—a man who probably has a major voice in the conduct of North Vietnam Army and Viet Cong operations in South Vietnam.

According to Giap, war between a relatively small and weak colony or semi-colony (Vietnam) and a relatively large and strong imperialist power (France or the United States) must assume a particular form—called “Protracted War”—if the weaker protagonist is to win.

The theory of this form of war was developed and articulated during the 1930's by Mao Tse-Tung in a series of lectures and pamphlets, but especially in his piece, “On Protracted Conflict.” Giap accepts and repeats the general Maoist concept that a protracted war passes through three stages:

1. **A stage of contention, when the smaller and weaker is on the strategic defensive and tactical offensive.**
2. **A stage of equilibrium, when the antagonists are relatively equal in power and both contend for the initiative.**
3. **A stage of general counter-offensive, when the initiative passes to the once smaller and weaker and the imperialist power finds itself on the strategic and tactical defensive.**

If a smaller and weaker power is to win in a protracted war, it must adapt both strategy and tactics to the various stages through which the conflict must pass. In Stage 1, guerrilla warfare is the preferred mode—small, lightly armed groups assume the tactical offensive by attacking the enemy where and when they can obtain local superiority.

In Stage 2, “groups” begin to be organized into platoons, companies, and battalions—sometimes even into divisions—and they continue to attack when and where they can obtain superiority.

During this stage, what Giap calls mobile warfare develops—“a form of fighting in which the principles of regular warfare gradually appear and increasingly develop but still bear a guerrilla character.”

Finally, in Stage 3, mobile warfare becomes dominant while guerrilla warfare continues. The large-scale battles in China in 1947-48 and the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam in 1954 exemplify operations during Stage 3.

Along with this neat division of protracted war into stages, however, Giap is aware that it is not possible to define clearly in advance a passage from one stage to the next.

For example, the Viet Minh offensives against the French in the spring of 1951 involving use of “regular” divisions against French regulars were beaten back—the Viet Minh were not strong enough to launch into Stage 3.

Nevertheless, in the course of these offensives and those of the rest of 1951-52, the Viet Minh regulars learned how to do their job; they were trained for Stage 3.

It is important to note that if one probes to find out whether the war is passing into a new stage and discovers that it is not, it is perfectly acceptable to continue on in the present stage. It is also possible that in a protracted war, conflict can regress from Stage 3 to Stage 2 or even from Stage 2 to Stage 1.

Another theme in Giap's work is what might be called the “set-piece battle.” This is illustrated by his remark, “Strike to win, strike only when success is certain; if it is not, then don't strike.”

Great pains must be taken to plan a battle ahead of time to insure that the tactical superiority of the attacker is guaranteed. This suggests, although not explicitly, set-piece battles planned in great detail before execution.

**VC and helpers
set up punji
stake pit, a
hazard to all
footsoldiers.**



Furthermore, there also is a suggestion, running through Giap's writing, of a long series of set-piece battles, beginning with guerrilla raids in Stage 1 of the protracted conflict and culminating in the final great battle of the war—a Dien Bien Phu or an Armageddon, where the forces of good and evil face each other in the last battle.

Giap writes of the necessity for developing military forces at three levels: local, regional, and national. These correspond to the levels of forces we find operating in

South Vietnam today, and again, the idea may be traced directly to Mao Tse-Tung.

Presumably, at the outset of a protracted conflict, the local forces would be the first to be created; but it is important to initiate the formation of regional and national ("regular army") forces at the earliest opportunity and to train them in mobile warfare as well as guerrilla warfare.

Thus, the Viet Minh attacks against the French in divisional size in 1951-52, or North Vietnamese Army attacks against Free

World forces in Quang Tri in 1966, might be viewed as bloody failures; but they also might be viewed as invaluable training exercises for the officers and men who survived.

A fourth theme is the emphasis on a secure base, resistance base or revolutionary military base, which can provide the necessary logistic support to forces and which can be defended. During the war against the French, the Viet Minh developed such bases in the highlands around the Red River delta in North Vietnam.

Since at least 1956, North Vietnam has been developed to serve as a revolutionary military base for the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, supplemented by additional base areas in the South (for example, War Zones C and D).

Once again, Giap follows the guidance of Mao Tse-Tung, who recognized the importance of bases in remote areas almost 40 years ago.

A final theme relates to party leadership of the forces engaged in a protracted conflict:

Giap obviously agrees with Mao Tse-Tung's celebrated statement, "Political power

comes out of the barrel of a gun," but both Mao and Giap also believe that the communist party, by whatever name it has locally, must control the aiming of the gun.

For this reason, political officers are introduced from company level up in the military organization, and great effort is exerted to control the political thinking of the forces.

In summary, **People's War, People's Army**, is dominated by five themes:

1. **Protracted conflict**
2. **The set-piece battle**
3. **Three levels of forces**
4. **Secure bases**
5. **Political control**

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VC guerrillas lay in readiness in Delta operation.