

The Lessons We Choose: The U.S. Army and Indifference Toward the French Indochina Experience

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The sound of a bugle halts bereted soldiers walking along a dusty road. Their officers, riding atop a nearby jeep, survey the surrounding landscape as their pristine, white képis shine in the sun. Only moments later, every man in the convoy lies dead, overrun by a horde of khaki-clad Viet Minh soldiers who extend their defeated enemy no quarter. This scene, featured in the first two minutes of *We Were Soldiers*, depicts the ambush of French Mobile Group 100 in 1954, and represents a rare reference to a forgotten war. The narrator, reflecting on the story he is about to divulge, utters a seemingly insignificant phrase followed by an open-ended question; “To tell this story, I must start at the beginning. But where does it begin?”¹ This phrase, though merely a sidebar to the plot, is emblematic of the First Indochina War. Despite this modern pop culture rectification, the Americans who stood the most to gain from French experiences neither listened nor cared to take heed of those who came before them.

The disruption of the traditional balance of power by the Second World War caused a ripple effect across the world. Colonial empires were no longer able to project the same amount of power on their overseas possessions, allowing nationalist movements to take root and create distance with their former masters. Despite the French commitment to the cultural crusade of *mission civilisatrice*, the people of French Indochina inevitably sought to regain control over their land despite internal divisions over how to accomplish this goal.² The states of Tonkin, Annam, and Cocinchina, collectively known as Vietnam, became a battleground where 21,000 men—more than six percent of the French Expeditionary Corps—sustained fatal wounds, alongside staggering numbers of their Viet Minh

¹ Randall Wallace, *We Were Soldiers*, (Hollywood, California: Paramount Productions, 2002), 0:01:01.

² Meaning “civilizing mission,” this was the justification used over multiple centuries for French colonization throughout the world. See W. Scott Thompson, “Lessons From the French in Vietnam,” *Naval War College Review* 28, no. 2 (1975): 45-46.

adversaries.³ Even with France's political and military deterioration in the face of growing Viet Minh strength, few outside of France or Indochina took notice of the war until 1954. By May, France had been evicted from Indochina at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, and the United States stood poised to take its place to stem the rapid growth of communism in Southeast Asia.

Though rarely studied in depth, the First Indochina War was an inflection point early in the Cold War. As France's influence in the region waned in the face of a unique blend of communism and nationalism, the United States saw it increasingly necessary to buttress the war effort and eventually intervene on behalf of South Vietnam. Though this transition took place over the course of nearly fifteen years, the United States Army was woefully unprepared for the type of war it was about to face. It spent millions of dollars on advanced technology, countless hours studying counterinsurgency case studies, and developed new doctrine to revolutionize the pace of battle using helicopters. However, it failed to do one of the simplest things possible: learn from those that fought a similar war only a decade prior. The following study sought to answer a simple question: how did the United States Army view the French experience in the First Indochina War? The resulting research exposed a pattern of American indifference to relevant lessons that could have been gained from the conflict. The three-stage pattern, beginning in 1950, displays the gradual acceptance and implementation of French lessons learned in Vietnam, only becoming a significant effort after it was too late and largely ignoring lessons beyond the tactical level. The following paper will examine the United States Army's shifting evaluation of the French experience in Vietnam between 1950 and 1969, analyzing the reasons for and ramifications of its failure to accept relevant lessons.

Before reviewing the historiography of the First Indochina War and its American reputation, it is important to understand the various phases of this pattern. Between 1950 and 1969, members of the U.S. Army gradually ascribed more value to French lessons as the American role in Southeast Asia expanded. The first period spans from the beginning of major

³ Thomas C. Thayer, "Patterns of the French and American Experience in Vietnam," in *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977), 23. For comparison, the average American death rate was only around 1.8%, which is the difference between one in fifty-five chance of dying for U.S. soldiers versus a one in fifteen chance for the French. Though exact casualty statistics on the Viet Minh side are unknown, estimates range from 175,000 to 365,000 killed in battle.

American involvement in Indochina in 1950 to the assumption of the burden of responsibility following the departure of the French Expeditionary Force in April of 1956. During these years, the Army saw the French experience as little more than an absolute failure, displaying indifference towards the potentially valuable lessons from the conflict. The second period spans from the American assumption of responsibility in 1956 to the absorption of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) into Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), in 1964. This amalgamation and the coinciding troop increases signified a marked increase in the size and scope of the American mission. The Army's focus on developing generally applicable counterinsurgency doctrine made it more willing to consider the value of French experiences around the world during this period, though these were rarely specific to Vietnam. The final period picks up in 1964 and ends as the United States began troop withdrawals in 1969. At this point, the U.S. Army and associated institutions finally began to ascribe definite value to the French experience in Indochina by implementing tactical lessons specific to Indochina. This pattern has significant implications for both the history of the U.S. Army and its future as a learning organization.

A review of relevant literature is foundational to an understanding of the First Indochina War and its reputation within the U.S. Army. With English language scholarship relatively rare during the war, Dr. Ellen Hammer became one of the first to write on the subject, publishing *The Struggle for Indochina: 1940-1955* in 1955.⁴ She studied the conflict in Indochina from the Japanese occupation during World War Two to the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1955, analyzing the political environment. Unlike most writing of the time, Hammer focused on the agency of Vietnamese individuals in Indochinese affairs, rather than treating them as bodies acted upon by European forces. Equally rare, Hammer utilized a significant amount of Vietnamese language sources, allowing her to build a more comprehensive picture of the preconditions to the First Indochina War. As the first popular study on the First Indochina War, *The Struggle for Indochina* was the preeminent reference for many Army publications throughout the late 1950s. It remained the most popular source until the work of Bernard Fall came to the forefront in the next decade.

⁴ Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina, 1940-1955* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1955).

While Dr. Hammer's work dealt primarily with the conflict's political side, many of the most influential books focused on French Army's military experiences. Dr. Bernard Fall, a well-known journalist and scholar, wrote the most influential of these: *Street Without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina*. As the result of doctoral research, Fall made multiple trips to Indochina in the final years of the war and accompanied French Union troops into combat. His goal was to illustrate the futility of conventional French Army forces carrying out the style of warfare that was necessary to pacify Indochina. This critical focus made his work significantly more appealing to the military reader than political and cultural analyses like Hammer's. The consistent tone of forewarning in Fall's writing is particularly relevant to this topic. Concluding *Street Without Joy*, he wrote, "... perhaps this is a good epitaph...for the Americans who will now have to follow in [French Soldiers'] footsteps."⁵ Though not explicitly mentioned in the purpose, the tone and timing of *Street Without Joy* in 1961 served as a warning to the United States to back out before it was too late. *Street Without Joy* was the go-to book for members of the Army who sought to better understand the Vietnamese operating environment, especially since it was written in English.⁶ Among the first writers to highlight the French experience and subsequent American disinterest, Fall deserves a prominent spot within the historiography of the First Indochina War.

During the years of full-scale U.S. involvement, scholarship was largely limited to studies conducted internally by the military, government, and associated think tanks, such as the RAND and BDM Corporations. These studies were classified until years after the war and thus do not fit the typical definition of historical scholarship, but are important nonetheless.⁷ The next significant body of literature emerged in the decades after the American withdrawal. Facing the shock of defeat and a military identity crisis, many authors sought to build a body of lessons on what went wrong for the United States. *The Lessons of Vietnam* was the

⁵ Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2018), 382.

⁶ LTG (R) Hal Moore wrote about reading *Street Without Joy* prior to deploying to Vietnam in *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young*. The USMA Library's collection also supports my assertion, which has more than seventeen copies of *Street Without Joy*, many of which were bound in the mid-1960s as the American effort in Vietnam rapidly expanded. *Hell in a Very Small Place* (1966), Fall's book on the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, also served as popular reading for officers heading to Southeast Asia.

⁷ Relevant examples of these studies are discussed on pages 12-13.

product of a colloquium on “The Military Lessons of the Vietnamese War” held at Tufts University’s Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in 1973 and 1974. One of the most relevant papers was “Patterns of the French and American Experience in Vietnam,” by systems analyst Thomas Thayer. His quantitative analysis of the First Indochina War deduced various lessons that the U.S. military overlooked, and served as the basis for his later book, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam*.⁸ Though frequently technical, Thayer provides an unvarnished review of why the U.S. failed to achieve victory. Another important work during this period is Andrew Krepinevich’s *The Army and Vietnam*. While Krepinevich focuses on the Army’s unpreparedness for counterinsurgency, his work often delves into the sluggish learning process that occurred in various professional circles, including military journals and higher education.⁹ Krepinevich’s topic is closely related to the discussion of Army learning that this paper will engage in.

In the early 2000s, the U.S. Army’s newest identity crisis precipitated even more literature reexamining the Vietnam War. As the nation became embroiled in the counterinsurgency operations of Iraq and Afghanistan, policymakers and scholars alike scrambled to draw relevant lessons from the past. This trend spurred the publication of *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations, 1942-1976*, the second volume of the Army’s official history on counterinsurgency. Andrew Birtle, a historian with the Center for Military History, discusses multiple cases of American involvement in small wars, such as advisory efforts in Greece and the Philippines, as well as direct action in Korea and Vietnam.¹⁰ Birtle analyzes the lessons the Army learned in each of these cases, how these lessons were incorporated into doctrine, and how they were utilized in future conflicts. Similar to *The Army and Vietnam*, this book is relevant because of its analysis of how the Army learned from the French during its advisory efforts in the First Indochina War. Though its

⁸ Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016).

⁹ Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). This period is also when most of the Army’s official histories of the Vietnam War were first published, though they rarely took a strong stance on lessons of the war.

¹⁰ A. J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (CMH Pub 70) (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006).

scope is broader than Krepinevich's, it contains a high level of detail. Birtle made use of a variety of Army internal sources, such as the Army War College's student papers and archives, that are otherwise unavailable.¹¹ *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations, 1942-1976* is a valuable resource for anyone researching the topics of counterinsurgency or learning within the Army.

Though more recent histories of the Vietnam War often drew attention to international actors, there is also a variety of scholarship that takes another look at American actions. Such is the case with former Department of History instructor Gregory Daddis' *Westmoreland's War*. Daddis challenges the traditional notion that General William Westmoreland was responsible for the United States' flawed strategy in Vietnam, and argues for a more comprehensive view of the man and the situation. Specifically, Daddis sought to combat the simple characterization of William Westmoreland, along with the conclusion that attrition drove every aspect of the U.S. effort in South Vietnam.¹² To accomplish this, Daddis examines the institutional culture of the Army leading to and throughout the war, discussing the development and study of counterinsurgency doctrine. His insights on the Army War College's curriculum and operations were particularly relevant to this study. *Westmoreland's War* is a valuable reconsideration of a key figure in the United States Army and the institutions that supported him. In contrast, Cold War scholar Frederik Logevall's *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* used the First Indochina War to contextualize America's conflict years later. Logevall's study detailed the Vietnamese anticolonial struggles against the French, while also discussing high-level American decisions that set the stage for the future. *Embers of War* is a comprehensive discussion that can serve as good background familiarization with the First Indochina War and the decisions that led America to Vietnam.

America's ever-expanding role in Indochina began in earnest in 1950 with the initiation of major military assistance efforts. Following reports of waning French control, Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall

¹¹ With the COVID-19 Pandemic, there was no opportunity to visit the U.S. Army War College (USAWC) to conduct research. Additionally, there are no student papers from my time period (1950-1969) available digitally, and the USAWC library could only provide bibliographies on the subject.

¹² Gregory Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 93.

approved the establishment of the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Indochina (MAAG). The interservice group's purpose was to supervise the flow of American military aid to the French with its modest authorized strength of 128 men, despite a much smaller initial roster.¹³ Though consequential in hindsight, the creation of MAAG was far from groundbreaking in 1950; Korea had the world's attention, and Indochina was just one of multiple MAAGs established throughout Asia, including Thailand and Taiwan, followed later by Laos and Cambodia. In addition to supervising the French receipt of World War II surplus, the advisory group served in an evaluative function. In what they called "end-use visits," the MAAG Army section's members visited French and allied units in the field, observing how well they took care of the American-supplied equipment.¹⁴ These maintenance reports were simply an accountability method, ensuring that U.S. dollars were not being thrown away as a result of French neglect. However, these visits also came with a secondary purpose: while inspecting equipment upkeep, advisors also made status reports assessing the morale, readiness, and training level of each unit.¹⁵ Though originally intended for logistical oversight, MAAG's role included an analytical component, determining the efficacy of the French and Vietnamese armies. Thus, the officers and non-commissioned officers of MAAG began the foundational process of ascribing value to the French experience in Vietnam.

Initial perceptions of the French experience were mixed. At the lowest level, American soldiers saw their European counterparts in a positive light. French combat leaders were lauded for their personal courage, quality training, and gained credit for their extensive combat experiences against the Viet Minh.¹⁶ These reviews came from U.S. advisors who served alongside junior French officers and they demonstrate the primary attributes American soldiers value: courage and competence. Similarly, later end-use visits reflected proficiency in a variety of support

¹³George S. Eckhardt, *Command and Control, 1950-1969*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1974), 7.

¹⁴Nathaniel R. Weber, "The United States Military Assistance Advisory Group in French Indochina, 1950-1956" (Master of Arts, Texas A&M University, 2010), 22.

¹⁵Ibid., 22.

¹⁶French officers often had as many as three or four years of experience fighting the Viet Minh. See MAAG Monthly Activity Report January 1953, MAAG Adjutant General Division, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, MD in Weber, "The United States Military Assistance Advisory Group in French Indochina, 1950-1956", 31.

branches. French artillerymen, engineers, and medical personnel consistently received reviews that described them as “excellent” and “exceptionally good” at their tasks.¹⁷ These evaluations indicated a degree of admiration and respect for the abilities of Frenchmen as soldiers. These officers and support personnel met the American criteria for first-rate soldiership, and thus gained the respect of their advisors. American soldiers saw value in the experiences of their European counterparts because they were experienced, competent at their jobs, and courageous.

In contrast, views of French strategy and the higher echelons that crafted it were hardly complimentary. For much of the war, French plans revolved around the occupation of static, fortified positions as bases from which to launch operations. Despite early success under Marshal Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, these positions quickly strained the French Army, immobilizing 120,000 to 140,000 troops in small groups at these isolated strongpoints.¹⁸ Naturally, this strategy lent itself to a more passive, defensive posture, which was frequently the subject of American rebuke. French plans were deemed to be lacking in aggression and plagued by excessive caution, causing their failure, “to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative.”¹⁹ Evident in echoes of this statement by other senior leaders, Americans wholeheartedly believed that French failures were due to passivity and idle posture. Unlike the perceptions of junior soldiers, these plans were seen as cowardly and militarily unsound. Accordingly, American officers made attempts to steer French strategy in what they thought to be a more acceptable direction, though they were rarely successful. On this relationship, one French journalist said that, “...American officers also tried to supervise strategy; but after a few fruitless brushes with a high command that was ferociously attached to its prerogatives, they decided to leave it entirely to the French.”²⁰ Thus, the

¹⁷ Field Estimate, January 1953, MAAG Adjutant General Division, NARA, in Weber, “The United States Military Assistance Advisory Group in French Indochina, 1950-1956” in Weber, “The United States Military Assistance Advisory Group in French Indochina, 1950-1956”, 31.

¹⁸ Bernard B. Fall, “Indochina: the Seven-Year Dilemma” *Military Review* 33, no. 7 (October 1953): 30.

¹⁹ “Study on Army Aspects on the Military Assistance Program in Vietnam” (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, June 1960), E-11.

²⁰ Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force (Pentagon Papers), “Part II: U.S. Involvement in the Franco-Viet Minh War, 1950-54,” dated January, 1969, RG 330, National Archives Catalog, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/5890486>.

French neither requested nor accepted American counsel and saw the U.S. strictly as supervisors for the provision of matériel, exacerbating the contentious relationship. French and American conceptions of successful strategy were ultimately incongruent, leading to friction between the two groups and early dismissal of the upper echelons of the French Army.

Despite the importance of the MAAG mission in forming the U.S. Army's understanding of Indochina, it was not a particularly desirable assignment. Rather than looking forward to tours of duty in Vietnam, officers often considered it a hardship and tended to prioritize escaping unscathed over building rapport with foreign armies.²¹ Unsurprisingly, officers returning from MAAG reflected little faith in the utility of their experiences. Rather than writing about his deductions as a senior infantry officer in the MAAG Army Section, Lieutenant Colonel Jacob Riley decided to mull over the definition and origins of the corps echelon.²² Similarly, Major Eugene Camp, an infantry officer assigned to MAAG, won a monthly *Military Review* award not for writing about his experiences in Indochina, but for the article he wrote on the Duke of Wellington.²³ Though these men do not deserve rebuke merely for their desire to research topics of traditional military history, their actions are revealing. They saw more educational value for military professionals in these subjects than they did in their nation's growing struggle against communism in the jungles of Vietnam. Beyond an awareness of operational security or humble aversion to telling war stories, these officers probably did not want to write about their experiences because they would not be of interest to the readers and that the experiences provided little value.

Just like Lieutenant Colonel Riley and Major Camp, the Army's centers of professional military education demonstrated little interest in the French experience in Indochina. Beginning in the interwar period, the *Military Review* served as the consolidation of significant military articles from around the world by the staff of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. During World War II, the publication transformed into a professional military journal intended to serve as a monthly review of military literature, but also a

²¹ Mark M. Boatner, "The Unheeded History of Counterinsurgency," *Army* 16, no. 9 (September 1966): 35.

²² Jacob L. Riley, "What Is a Corps?," *Military Review* 36, no. 7 (October 1956).

²³ Eugene C. Camp, "The Estimate and the Duke of Wellington," *Military Review* 38, no. 9 (December 1958).

center of critical thinking and analysis.²⁴ With its central role in the Army's learning processes, *Military Review* serves as an indicator of trends in the Army's collective thinking and what it sees as valuable for its leaders. Between 1952 and 1958, French experiences in Indochina received incredibly scarce coverage. Only thirteen articles published in *Military Review* during this period incorporated lessons from the First Indochina War.²⁵ The majority were foreign military digests, written by officers of allied nations for their respective professional publications before being pasted into *Military Review*.²⁶ These articles were far from the center of attention, tucked into the rear sections of the journal and reprinted months or even years after their original publication date. Four of the remaining articles, and likely the most informative and salient, were written by the well-known journalist Bernard Fall as he sought to warn the United States of its impending mistakes. The remaining articles written by U.S. Army officers during this period were inconsequential at best, with only one directly studying the French experience.²⁷ At the field-grade officer level, few students of war were interested in gleaning lessons from their French counterparts.

Moving further up the ranks, the Army War College (AWC) represents an important institution of U.S. Army higher education. Intended to groom officers who will soon assume senior leadership positions, the college seeks to educate its students on thinking at the strategic level. In 1951, around twenty percent of the Class of 1952 was assigned to study American policy in Southeast Asia, with several students writing individual papers on the army's response to revolutionary warfare.²⁸ This represented a forward-thinking use of intellectual resources

²⁴ For more information on *Military Review*, see its page on the Army University Press website: "About Army University Press," accessed April 24, 2021, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/About/>.

²⁵ Digging through the Combined Arms Research Library's *Military Review* archives will reveal more than 13 articles, but many of these articles mention Indochina in name only without providing any valuable content or discussion. I selected articles that contained discussion of the topic more than a mere passing reference or allusion.

²⁶ See M.D. Malgonkar, "The Situation in Indochina," *Military Review* 32, no. 3 (June 1952): 85-88, J.W. Leigh-Cooper, "Indochina Through the Centuries," *Military Review* 34, no. 7 (October 1954): 82-86, and Colonel Nemo, "The Place of Guerilla Action in War," *Military Review* 37, no. 8 (November 1957): 99-107.

²⁷ Norman E. Martin, "Dien Bien Phu and the Future of Airborne Operations," *Military Review* 36, no. 3 (June 1956): 19-26.

²⁸ Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, 27.

within the Army community and demonstrated at least some attempt to prepare for future conflicts. However, despite the pertinence of the ongoing French experience in Indochina, the topic received minimal coverage. Retired Colonel Bruce Palmer was one of the members of the Class of 1952 assigned to study Southeast Asia. He remarked that their report merely made broad conclusions about potentially fighting in Vietnam, with little reference to the French other than a critique of the American decision to permit their return to colonial rule.²⁹ Though studies of the strategic landscape of Southeast Asia were certainly important, they would be remiss without a discussion of ongoing French efforts in Vietnam. France had been fighting the Viet Minh for nearly six consecutive years by 1951, and there is no excuse for a senior military institution to ignore a clear, compelling, and current case study.³⁰ In total, out of nearly 1700 papers written by students at the AWC between 1951 and 1960, only four handled the First Indochina War and one examined the way the Viet Minh fought.³¹ In sum, there was a blatant lack of interest in Indochina from the students of the AWC throughout the 1950s. In combination with the sentiments of the Command and General Staff College, few rising officers in the U.S. Army assigned significant value to French experiences fighting the Viet Minh.

Beyond disinterest at the Army War College, a variety of factors contributed to an antagonistic American outlook on the French experience in Vietnam. Foremost, the American attitude towards colonialism was a major sticking point. Traditionally, Americans have harbored a “general tendency to perceive colonialism at first hand as backward and immoral.”³² As a nation that prided itself on democratic values and predicated much of its Cold War strategy on self-determination, colonialism was uncompromisingly wrong and antithetical to the American way of life. Furthermore, America proudly displayed its anticolonial sentiments. Mirroring President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s sentiments, Americans were and always have been quick to point out the American Revolutionary

²⁹ Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War America’s Military Role in Vietnam*. (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 2-3.

³⁰ For a discussion of practical reasons why these lessons may have been ignored by those at CGSC, see Martin, “Dien Bien Phu and the Future of Airborne Operations.”

³¹ George C. Herring, “The Legacy of the First Indochina War” (The Second Indochina War, Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1986), 34.

³² Dennis E. Showalter, “Dien Bien Phu in Three Cultures,” *War & Society* 16, no. 2 (October 1, 1998): 99, <https://doi.org/10.1179/072924798791201363>.

War and our revolutionary spirit, displaying them as symbols of our ideals.³³ Thus, even at the lowest levels of interaction, Americans exhibited a distaste for what they believed was a morally repugnant French cause. These objectionable ideals were not easily divorced from the practical lessons of the First Indochina War in the American mind.

Beyond the American feeling of moral superiority, the United States wholeheartedly embraced a presumption of French military incompetence. Despite earning the respect of MAAG advisors, the French Army was still seen as unskilled in dealing with issues in Indochina. In many ways, this came from a flawed understanding of the conflict by U.S. officers and policymakers. Even after years of an established American presence, many leaders in both the military and civilian spheres severely misunderstood the war, assuming that, “poorly armed guerillas, even in swamps and jungles, shouldn’t be too difficult to beat.”³⁴ Thus, a significant amount of officials believed in an oversimplified concept of the war the French were fighting. This unsophisticated view of the conflict led many to make sweeping generalizations that only convinced more Americans of French inferiority. On an early familiarization mission, General Graves B. Erskine viewed a defensive position he considered substandard and later remarked that, “They had a brigadier in command of the area who...couldn’t make a decent corporal.”³⁵ Statements by influential leaders such as Erskine influenced other American officers to adopt generally weak views of French capabilities, leading to the lack of perceived value in French experiences.

Alongside perceptions of the French, the U.S. Army had other concerns outside of Southeast Asia. After the Korean War dominated the first three years of the 1950s, the United States remained concentrated on the threat of war against the Soviet Union. *FM 100-5:Field Service Regulations: Operations*, one of the Army’s foundational doctrinal publications of the 1950s, reflected this focus. The manual stressed the importance of maneuver and taking the offensive, while treating atomic weapons like normal munitions.³⁶ This expectation of war in Europe

³³ Thompson, “Lessons From the French in Vietnam,” 50.

³⁴ “Conduct of the War: Operational Analyses,” A Study of the Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Volume 6, Book 1 (BDM Corporation, 1981), 1-14.

³⁵ Erskine interview in Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983), 114.

³⁶ Brian McAllister Linn, *Elvis’s Army: Cold War GIs and the Atomic Battlefield* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 79-80.

remained throughout the Cold War and develop as atomics became more prevalent. Under President Dwight D. Eisenhower's New Look Policy, the Navy and Air Force took priority, creating an identity crisis for the Army. Developments in nuclear weapons technology, including multimegaton warheads, led to the prioritization of B-52 bombers and ballistic missile submarines as more powerful tools of diplomacy than columns of armor and infantry.³⁷ Thus, the Army struggled to redefine its role and adapt to the atomic battlefield. Attempts to maintain the relevance of the Army were a significant concern of its upper leadership. Upon becoming Chief of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor exclaimed that, "the Army is burning its military textbooks to clear away the old and make room for the new..."³⁸ Taylor saw radical change as necessary to secure funding and purpose for the Army in the years ahead. All of these factors ensured that Academic discourse in the United States Army was dominated by discussions on atomic warfare and conflict with the Soviets for years to come. The result was a professional environment where it was more desirable for officers to study conventional or atomic warfare than small "brushfire" wars.

All of these factors contributed to a starkly indifferent U.S. Army. Americans of all levels were hesitant to study the French experience because, after all, they lost. Army Colonel Mark Boatman summarized this phenomenon best, describing it as, "a supercilious attitude that there is little for us to learn...After all, *we* have never lost a war!"³⁹ Though written sarcastically, Boatman's statement was remarkably common. Not even the most experienced senior leaders in the United States Army were impervious to this arrogance. General William Westmoreland, the commander of the U.S. effort in Vietnam, was later quoted at a press conference undercutting his predecessors, exclaiming, "Why should I study the lessons of the French? They haven't won a war since Napoleon!"⁴⁰ Whether Westmoreland meant it or not, his statements carry

³⁷ Linn, *Elvis's Army: Cold War GIs and the Atomic Battlefield*, 85.

³⁸ Maxwell Taylor, address, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, June 18, 1957, in Linn, *Elvis's Army*, 87. Though this speech is one year beyond the range of the first period, it epitomizes the struggles faced by the army when trying to reinvent itself. Taylor's statement would be manifested in the reorganization into pentomic divisions. These formations were intended to remain dispersed to avoid enemy targeting, reflecting the belief that tactical nuclear weapons would be commonplace in wars of the future.

³⁹ Boatner, "The Unheeded History of Counterinsurgency," 32.

⁴⁰ A variety of sources cite this quote, though nearly all lead back to its use by Thomas Thayer. In his 1973 paper, *Patterns of the French and American Experience in Vietnam*,

weight. Not only are they considered representative of the broader Army, but his mindset also seeped down to lower commands and influenced their thinking. Each of these factors combined to form what Dr. W. Scott Thompson termed “...peculiar American conceits of the moment.”⁴¹ In essence, Thompson argued that the United States had a unique sense of invincibility leading up to Vietnam, causing it to ignore France’s experience. The nation that had never lost a war certainly had nothing to gain from one that could not seem to win in the 20th century, nor would it be threatened by anyone with less firepower and technology. Between 1950 and 1956, the U.S. Army was ultimately indifferent towards French experiences due to perceptions of French incompetence due to their defeat, American anticolonial attitudes, and the Army’s diverging interest in fighting the Soviet Union.

Following the exit of French forces in 1956, the American role in Vietnam increased in both size and character. The rapid French withdrawal pursuant to the Geneva Accords of 1954 left a vacuum in the defense establishment of South Vietnam. Though the United States remained committed to Vietnam, it did not initially intend to fill the gap itself. Redesignated as Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAGV), American advisors sought to build the local capacity of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). MAAGV took efforts to reorganize the ARVN command structure, improve training programs, and educate Vietnamese officers.⁴² These efforts kept the American commitment relatively low while building organic Vietnamese capacity to fight for itself and maintain the viability of its government. Though the role of MAAGV was different than it had been under the French, its advisors

Thayer notes that origin of this quote was “a four-star general.” (p. 22) Later on in a 1998 interview, journalist and former Army officer David Hackworth attributed the phrase to General William Westmoreland. In *No Sure Victory*, Gregory Daddis cites Thayer’s use of the quote in *War Without Fronts*, which merely states the phrase but does not credit it in any way, leading to Daddis’ broad characterization of the origin as “one American.” (p. 32) In *Prelude to Tragedy*, George Tanham accredits the quote to “a senior officer.” (p. 175) It is likely that the phrase was a common jab among officers at their French counterparts. Furthermore, the presence of two sources that reasonably point to Westmoreland as the origin, and no contradictory sources, I attribute this quote to General William Westmoreland.

⁴¹ Thompson, “Lessons from the French in Vietnam,” 50.

⁴² James Lawton Collins, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1975), 12-15, <https://history.army.mil/html/books/090/90-10/index.html>.

still stayed out of direct combat and leadership of local troops. However, by 1960, U.S. government officials determined that the Republic of Vietnam's military was inadequate in dealing with the emerging insurgency and required a revamped counterinsurgency plan to aid its struggling military.⁴³ Though the U.S. Army exhibited a mild interest in counterinsurgency warfare during the early 1950s, the 1960s brought a realistic demand for this knowledge with the broader context of President John F. Kennedy's Flexible Response strategy. Beginning around 1956, the U.S. Army embarked on a path to develop generally applicable counterinsurgency doctrine based on both current and past campaigns from around the world, a new stage in their evaluation of the French Indochina experience.

Along with the increased demand for counterinsurgency doctrine, the late fifties and early sixties featured a variety of developing insurgencies around the world. Just as in Indochina, Britain and France sought to reestablish their rule over several other colonies lost during World War II. The Malayan Emergency, beginning in 1948, was a major interest of the Army during this period. With the close of the decade, the success of the British counterinsurgency effort drew more attention than ever. By 1960, the Army was distributing copies of the British Manual *Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya* to its schools to aid in crafting doctrine.⁴⁴ Despite the unique nature of the situation in Malaya, the Army saw great value in British practices and began to base its doctrine off of them. Overall, Americans were far more willing to accept lessons from the British experience in Malaya. Additionally, unlike Indochina, the British successfully achieved their objectives, and Americans, "naturally gravitated toward winners, like the British, rather than losers."⁴⁵ It is much easier to see the value in methods that were successful rather than those that featured the stain of defeat, especially considering American "peculiar conceits" of invincibility at the moment. Thus, Army officers continued to look for successful counterinsurgency campaigns throughout the world.

Given the obvious differences from Indochina, the Army was far more willing to digest and distribute lessons gained from Algeria as it was a successful, ongoing effort. One of the most salient examples of this is the French doctrine of *la guerre revolutionnaire*, which was the result of a

⁴³ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁴ Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976*, 162.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

concerted effort by the French Army to learn from its mistakes in Indochina and consolidate lessons for future conflicts.⁴⁶ Though many of these lessons were derived from experience in Indochina, they were specifically oriented toward application in the ongoing counterinsurgency in Algeria. As the French experienced success against the National Liberation Front with this doctrine, the United State gained a heightened interest. Despite this doctrine only gradually emerging within France between 1956 and 1961, the U.S. Army moved with uncharacteristic speed in acquiring and translating French texts, such as issues of the *Revue Militaire d'Information*.⁴⁷ Though texts are of limited use if they are not read, the act of translation represents a shift in the Army's evaluation of French experiences. Lessons gained from Algeria were not seen as the products of an incompetent, ineffective army, but rather generally applicable tenets of counterinsurgency that could be applied throughout the world. Though this only developed as a byproduct of the Army's sudden counterinsurgency craze, it represents a notable shift in the Army's ascription of value to French experiences.

The Army's tangential interest in French experiences as part of the counterinsurgency craze was also reflected at the Command and General Staff College. Despite indifference to the counterinsurgency fad throughout much of the fifties and early sixties, *Military Review* gradually adapted. A study of the journal's contents revealed that after a spike in insurgency-related articles in 1962, coverage remained consistently around ten percent of total articles.⁴⁸ Considering the reactions of the rest of the Army, *Military Review* demonstrated considerable restraint in writing about counterinsurgency. However, given the requirements of Kennedy's Flexible Response strategy, which placed more emphasis on being able to fight small wars, Army leadership and the staff at the CGSC felt increasing pressure to incorporate counterinsurgency lessons. In 1962, *Military Review* published a selected bibliography of sources on guerrilla warfare that had been featured in the journal in the previous six years. Out of the sources listed, nearly one-fifth were written about French experiences, with more than half of those about Indochina.⁴⁹ Though the bibliography was a hasty stopgap measure by the journal to fill the shortage of topical materials

⁴⁶ Thompson, "Lessons from the French in Vietnam," 47.

⁴⁷ Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976*, 180.

⁴⁸ Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 41.

⁴⁹ "Guerrilla Warfare," *Military Review*, Vol. 42, No. 5 (May 1962): 73-82.

with past literature, it demonstrated an increase in the perceived utility of French experiences. Rare articles that were previously hidden within issues, obscured by discussions on nuclear warfare and countering the Soviets, took center stage. The interest of JFK and the Army in counterinsurgency led to increased willingness to see value in French experiences, as is evident with *Military Review*.

Though French wars never occupied a central role in most US professional military education programs, many took steps to expose their students to French experiences. Several offered opportunities to meet and converse with experts. Then Lieutenant Colonel Paul Aussaresses, a French liaison officer with service in Algeria and Indochina, often spoke at the Infantry and Special Warfare Schools regarding his counterinsurgency efforts against the National Liberation Front (FLN).⁵⁰ Aussaresses' discussions focused on counterinsurgency at the junior level with officers who would actually be on the ground carrying out the army's plans. Bernard Fall, one of the foremost experts on the French action in Indochina and an outspoken critic of American policy in Vietnam, frequently spoke at higher military institutions. Though his lectures at the Naval War College in 1964 are well known, the only records of him speaking at Army institutions come from lectures at the Special Warfare School and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. At the Industrial College, Fall discussed the insurgency in Algeria with smaller portions on Indochina, answering questions at the conclusion. When asked about whether his warnings have been heard in the Department of Defense, Fall responded, "...I do not know how high up...I have spoken with quite a few Army generals. But how much of this will 'stick' I don't know..."⁵¹ Though Fall was able to break through to the students in the audience at the Industrial College, his response indicates that his warnings continued to fall on deaf ears at the highest levels. Furthermore, Fall's relegation to speaking to the Industrial College of the Armed Forces is revealing. Despite his expertise, the message on Indochina was not significant enough to warrant speaking to the Army War College. Though the counterinsurgency trend during the late 1950s and early 1960s made the Army more willing to learn from French experiences in Indochina, they

⁵⁰ Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976*, 230. Aussaresses' admissions to the brutal torture of Algerians caused a major shock in the late 2000s.

⁵¹ Bernard Fall, "Counterinsurgency—the French Experience," (Lecture, Industrial College of the Armed Forces, January 18, 1963), 26.

were only valuable as additions to the counterinsurgency repertoire that the United States sought to build.

The year 1964 was an inflection point for the United States in Vietnam. For two years, both the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAGV), and Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), had operated parallel command structures with frequently overlapping responsibilities. With the support of important officials, including General Maxwell Taylor and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, MAAGV was absorbed by MACV, eliminating a significant dual channel within American military authority in Vietnam.⁵² Thus, the unified chain of command in Vietnam created a much more fluid decision-making process and signified the primacy of a different American mission moving forward. On top of the provocation of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and subsequent reprisals by both sides, the stability of South Vietnam was precarious at best. With South Vietnam losing the equivalent of one battalion and one district capital a week, and around half of South Vietnam in Communist hands, the situation had become dire.⁵³ With the rapid deterioration of the situation, President Johnson and General Westmoreland saw no other options but to fill the gap, deploying U.S. troops to Vietnam in significant numbers. The United States went from having a total force of 23,300 members of its military in Vietnam in 1964, to nearly 385,300 only two years later.⁵⁴ Thus, 1964 marked the beginning of a massive transformation in both the American mission and footprint in Vietnam. The role of the U.S. Army had fundamentally changed from advising to direct combat operations and demanded specific lessons to inform how it fought, signifying a shift into the third phase in the U.S. evaluation of the French Indochina experience.

Throughout the course of American involvement in Vietnam, the RAND Corporation played an important role in guiding and informing American decision-making. Despite sending officials to both Vietnam and Paris to write research reports on the First Indochina War in the late 1950s,

⁵² Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV the Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, United States Army in Vietnam, (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006), 126.

⁵³ Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976*, 323.

⁵⁴ "Vietnam War Campaigns," U.S. Army Center of Military History, accessed April 24, 2021, https://history.army.mil/html/reference/army_flag/vn.html.

RAND reports had the most influence between 1965 and 1967.⁵⁵ Covering a variety of topics, these reports were intended to aid the United States in any imaginable way and at every level. With the role of the Army on the ground rapidly expanding, RAND quickly began to translate helpful documents from the French experience in Vietnam into English. Victor Croizat, a former Marine liaison to the French Army in Indochina, made translating an official French “lessons learned” document one of his first actions as a RAND civilian employee in 1967. It included Viet Minh force structures, diagrams of popular ambush tactics used against French columns, and a variety of other tactics, techniques, and procedures.⁵⁶ The document, though lengthy, would have been extremely useful for adapting forces on the tactical and operational levels to Vietnam with tested methods learned by the French. Later that year, RAND was commissioned to write a research memorandum dealing with supply by porters. *Porterage Parameters and Tables* analyzed various facets of human logistics, including food requirements, trail capacities, and throughput in various conditions, claiming that, “[Though] the importance of porterage has been a recurrent and disputed issue in American military planning, as small scale conflicts have occurred in underdeveloped areas...it would be a mistake to dismiss porterage as trivial...”⁵⁷ Taking clear lessons from the underestimation of Viet Minh logistical capabilities by the French at Dien Bien Phu, the U.S. Army understood that the movement of supplies by porters across remote trails was a vital element of North Vietnamese logistics. Each of these RAND reports represents a tacit acknowledgment that the French experience in Vietnam was valuable and held utility for

⁵⁵ Mai Elliott, “RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era,” 2010, vii, https://www.rand.org/pubs/corporate_pubs/CP564.html.

⁵⁶ Victor J. Croizat, *A Translation from the French Lessons of the War in Indochina, Volume 2*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1967), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_memoranda/RM5271.html. Supposedly translated in 1955 by US Far East Command, but Croizat, in a letter to BDM Corporation later wrote that, “This information was available and remained available through all the intervening years until I made a translation of Volume II. I recall specifically bringing the existence of French lessons to the attention of General Paul Harkins [Then CDR of MACV]. But, he like so many others, found the British lessons from Malaya far easier to read...” in Letter from COL Croizat to Mr. J Angus MacDonald, Sept. 11, 1979.

⁵⁷ J. W. Higgins, “Porterage Parameters and Tables,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1967), iii. RAND also took part in interesting studies on the use of bicycle by army forces, including an interesting section on the Viet Minh use of modified Peugeot bicycles for logistics during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. See R. S. Kohn, “Bicycle Troops” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1965), 22.

ongoing American efforts.

Beyond practical lessons drawn by RAND reports, the Army also took limited steps to formally operationalize French lessons. Throughout much of the First Indochina War, French expeditionary forces sought to take advantage of the waterways that dissect the Vietnamese coast. To do so, they formed naval assault divisions, frequently referred to as Dinassauts, composed of army infantry under the operational control of the French Navy.⁵⁸ These forces, though useful as a means to cover much of the important Mekong and Red River Deltas, had a variety of shortcomings. When not conducting operations, Dinassaut squadrons used fixed operational bases on land, while also rarely operating in groups larger than “a company and five or six assault craft.”⁵⁹ These factors made the French riverine force highly vulnerable to attack when not conducting operations, with the use of small forces often impeding greater command and control. Though French Dinassaut troops did not play an imperative role in the First Indochina War, the lessons of their experiences were highly valuable to American soldiers years later.

In 1969, the U.S. Army decided to use French tactics to solve its problems in the Mekong Delta. Similar to French Dinassaut troops, a portion of the 9th Infantry Division (ID) was redesignated for riverine duty, working with a Navy task force to experiment on moving troops throughout the delta via gunboat, titled the Mobile Riverine Force.⁶⁰ The leaders of the 9th Infantry Division undertook a diligent study of their French allies when creating the Mobile Riverine Force. Instead of imitating the Dinassauts, these officers identified weaknesses of the French units and sought to remedy them in the American force. While Dinassauts utilized a fixed base on land, the 9th ID took advantage of landing ships, tank, (LST) to create mobile barracks ships to house soldiers and sailors when operating in the delta.⁶¹ This eliminated one of the major vulnerabilities

⁵⁸ The full name was Divisions Navales d'Assaut et Détachements Amphibies. William M. Waddell, *In the Year of the Tiger: The War for Cochinchina, 1945-1951*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 9.

⁵⁹ William B. Fulton, *Riverine Operations, 1966-1969* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1985), 81.

⁶⁰ “9th Infantry Division Methods of Operations and Tactics” in Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976*, 385. The riverine force concept was titled the Mobile Afloat Force, but for clarity I will use the final name: Mobile Riverine Force.

⁶¹ Fulton, *Riverine Operations, 1966-1969*, 27. For a good image of these ships, see page 28 of the same source.

that French riverine soldiers experienced, improving the effectiveness of U.S. Army forces. Additionally, American riverine units fixed issues with force structure and control. The Mobile Riverine Force generally operated in larger groups featuring more firepower, while also taking advantage of organic helicopters to facilitate command and control.⁶² These improvements built directly on French lessons learned from their experiences in the First Indochina War. The riverine doctrine developed by the 9th Infantry Division using Dinassaut experience was not valuable because of its broad suitability for counterinsurgency operations, but due to its specific applicability in the local tactical context of Indochina.⁶³

The U.S. Army was not the only arm of MACV under William Westmoreland seeking to learn from French experience. The Battle of Khe Sanh, the five-month siege of a Marine Corps base in the Quang Tri Province, spurred one of the most serious studies of French lessons throughout the entire war. Displaying eerie similarities to the demise of the French fourteen years earlier, American military leaders and government officials vowed not to witness, "...another damn Dinbinphoo."⁶⁴ As the situation deteriorated, the American Air Force supposedly rounded up every living French general involved in Dien Bien Phu and flew them to a command post established in Saigon.⁶⁵ Not only did this likely demand a significant amount of money and effort, but it also required acknowledging that the French were a valuable resource worth taking advantage of. U.S. Air Force Major General George Keegan wrote that using sand-table models, the French survivors detailed what was wrong, highlighting how to suppress anti-aircraft artillery for the airlift and the imperatives of using

⁶² *Ibid.*, 187.

⁶³ Another compelling adaptation made by U.S. forces in Vietnam was the implementation of "square" battalions. Following a review of Army organization in the ARCOV report, the Army decided increase the number of rifle companies in an infantry battalion from three to four. Similarly, French "Far East" battalions were organized with four rifle companies to allow three to maneuver with one in reserve. Despite the similarities, the ARCOV Report did not claim any connection to the French, and thus it is unclear whether there is any relation. See "Evaluation of U.S. Army Combat Operations on Vietnam (ARCOV)," (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1966), Texas Tech University Vietnam Archives, 2-II-51 and Victor Croizat, *A Translation from the French Lessons of the War in Indochina, Volume 2*, 221.

⁶⁴ President Lyndon B. Johnson in R.D. Camp, "Memories of Khe Sanh," *Naval History* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, February 2004), 33.

⁶⁵ Thompson, *Lessons from the French in Vietnam*, 50-51.

napalm to stop enemy tunneling.⁶⁶ Given the tumultuous nature of Franco-American relations in the 1960s, it would have been easy for the U.S. military to believe that it could succeed on its own. However, the willingness to find and solicit the skills of former members of the French Army in Indochina demonstrates the extent to which the U.S. evaluations of the French experience improved between 1964 and 1969. Pushed by exigency, the United States sought the counsel of those it had previously ridiculed.

While MACV implemented French lessons over in Vietnam, the Army's intellectual centers took heed back in the United States. Various military journals, including *Military Review* and *Army*, began to run articles that critiqued Army thinking in the Vietnam War thus far. Colonels Charles Biggio and Mark Boatner III, graduates of the Army War College Class of 1966, published articles highlighting the similarities between the First and Second Indochina Wars, hoping to spur further interest in the subjects going forward.⁶⁷ Biggio's article is a comprehensive review of French efforts to defeat the Viet Minh. He covers a variety of lessons on the characteristics of upper leadership down to proper responses to popular Viet Minh tactics, highlighting their applicability for U.S. forces.⁶⁸ The article was a relevant primer on the preconditions of the Vietnam war that would allow any military reader to understand the similarities between the situations. In contrast, Boatner's article was more academic in nature, challenging the leaders to learn from the French experience before the U.S. became too deeply ensnared in Vietnam.⁶⁹ Though neither of these articles may have sparked significant discourse on the First Indochina War, they are indicative of a greater shift in the values of the Army. They represent a trend toward acknowledging definite prejudices against the French experience, and the understanding that their lessons could apply directly to ongoing operations. Between 1964 and 1969, the U.S. Army ascribed greater value to the French experiences of the First Indochina War for the specific lessons that had the immediate potential to improve the

⁶⁶ George Keegan, "Dissatisfaction with the Air War," in W. Scott Thompson and Donald D. Frizzell, *The Lessons of Vietnam*, (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977), 138.

⁶⁷ See also Donn A. Starry, "La Guerre Revolutionnaire," *Military Review* 47, no. 12 (February 1967): 61-70. He was a member of the same class that published one year later.

⁶⁸ Charles Biggio, "Let's Learn From the French," *Military Review* 46, No. 10 (October 1966): 73-82.

⁶⁹ Boatner, "The Unheeded History of Counterinsurgency," 36.

performance of American units in Vietnam.

Vietnamese victory in the First Indochina War was a watershed moment in the Cold War. It was perhaps the first significant instance of a developing country, perceived to be inferior to its adversary in countless ways, defeating an established European power in decisive fashion. However, France's eviction from the region did not spell the end of conflict in Indochina. Instead, it left a vacuum that the United States felt increasingly drawn into by the growing tide of communism. Despite advising the French in Indochina for at least five years and working alongside them for several more, the United States Army saw little value in their experiences. During and immediately following the advisory period, the U.S. Army was indifferent to the lessons of its French counterparts, allowing anticolonial ideals, conceited attitudes, and divergent ideas of future warfare to obscure the value of these experiences. Following the exit of French forces in 1956, the focus of American advisory efforts shifted to the South Vietnamese Army. During this period, the U.S. Army's fixation with the development of a broad form of counterinsurgency caused it to consider global experiences, including the French war in Algeria and British experience in Malaya. Finally, the expansion of the American effort in 1964 changed the types of lessons the United States valued. Rather than the sole preoccupation with a generally applicable form of counterinsurgency, the Army sought to learn from and implement the specific lessons of the French Army during the First Indochina War.

In determining what to study and write about, we implicitly rank the past, assigning value to those experiences deemed useful and neglecting those left by the wayside. This is an inevitable process due to the limits of time and resources. However, it also is easy to become comfortable with familiar lessons and believe that they serve as adequate preparation for any situation. This fallacy has led many a nation into disaster, and is something the United States is all too familiar with. The lessons we pick reflect what we value at the present time—they are not necessarily the most important or relevant to new situations and problems. Such is the issue that arises when we pledge allegiance to an unchanging "canon" of lessons and topics, applicable at all times and in every situation, without forethought or diligence; it dooms us to a narrow conception of the possibilities that lie in the future. It is essential to build a curriculum not just from those situations that are familiar and interesting, but also those that have been continually relegated to the dustbins of

history: the losses, the “strange” cultures, and the downright boring. Each has a place in the development of an understanding of history that is comprehensive, complex, and truly useful. If we truly wish to embrace the motto *Sapientia per Historiam*, we cannot limit the boundaries of our curiosity to the lessons we choose.

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