12

The War in Numbers

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Progress toward victory in a guerrilla war could not often be measured by things like the conquest of crucial cities, so it was perhaps inevitable that the United States would rely to a large extent on statistical measures. The influence of Robert McNamara, US secretary of defense from 1961 to 1968, may have pushed this further than it otherwise would have gone. The first important step in his career had been his work using statistical analysis in the management of US Army Air Forces operations during World War II. When he began dealing with Vietnam in the early 1960s, he was eager to get briefings loaded with statistics, and he had a startling ability to remember them. Still, it is not clear that, without McNamara's influence, the US military would have been a lot less focused on statistics as measures of progress. The military was happy to comply with his wish for copious statistics, and military briefings remained heavily statistical long after McNamara was gone.

The statistics on the war that are available today come almost entirely from the United States government. The Republic of Vietnam (RVN) published few statistics during the war in places where they can now be found, and could not publish any after the war because it no longer existed. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN), the National Liberation Front (NLF), and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam published few detailed statistics either during or after the war.

The things the Americans could most easily measure – on which they could most easily get reasonably accurate statistics – were not always good indicators of actual progress. They measured efforts by the United States and the Republic of Vietnam – numbers of strategic hamlets built, quantities of commodities provided, and so forth – rather than the results of those efforts, changes in the relative strength of the government and the insurgency. Sometimes the statistical measures impeded effective conduct of the war. A Vietnamese navy officer who commanded RVN

coastal patrol forces commented that, in 1964, the American advisors to the Vietnamese navy began using the number of fishing boats searched each month for weapons or other contraband as a measure of the performance of the coastal patrol forces. Their pressure to increase the number of searches pushed patrol vessels to focus their patrols on areas with dense concentrations of fishing boats, where many could be searched in a short time, rather than on areas where there was a higher probability of spotting some NLF activity.[1]

In the early 1960s the measures that were considered most important were the ratio between RVN and NLF personnel losses (by death or capture) and the ratio between numbers of weapons captured by the two sides. The latter ratio could be measured more accurately. Figures on the number of RVN weapons captured by the NLF, and NLF weapons captured by the RVN, were much more reliable than figures on NLF personnel losses.

The extent of pressure to ensure that the statistics indeed showed progress, showed that the war was being won, fluctuated over the course of the war. In the early 1960s the two officials most conspicuously exerting such pressure were Secretary of Defense McNamara and the first commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), General Paul Harkins. In October 1963, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research issued a memorandum, "Statistics on the War Effort in South Vietnam Show Unfavorable Trends," using just the sort of statistics that McNamara treated as authoritative, to demonstrate that the war was not going well.[2] McNamara was furious; he asked Secretary of State Dean Rusk to ensure that no such thing be permitted to happen again. But McNamara was almost at the end of his ability to persuade himself that the war was going well. By December he was admitting that it was going badly, so he stopped pressing those reporting statistics to make the statistics show progress. General Harkins, however, continued to apply such pressure until his departure in June 1964.

During the years of rapid escalation that followed, the main statistical measurements used were the figures for the current strength and the losses of US, RVN, and communist forces. The US government's figures for most of these were in some way problematic.

1 Thoai Hovanky, *The Last Admiral: Memoirs of the Last Surviving South Vietnamese Admiral* (Columbia, SC, 2021), 57.

2 Research Memorandum RFE-90, October 22, 1963, *United States–Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967* (Washington, DC, 1971), Book 12, V.B.4., 579–89.

Figure 12.1 US secretary of defense Robert S. McNamara points to a map of Vietnam during a press conference (April 26, 1965).
Source: PhotoQuest / Contributor / Archive Photos / Getty Images.

US and RVN Strength and Losses

The United States regularly released figures on the number of US military personnel in Vietnam, and on casualties by week. The figures on personnel strength in Vietnam seem to have been accurate, though they were in a sense incomplete, since many of the US personnel involved in the war were on ships off the coast, or at military bases in Thailand, Okinawa, and Guam that handled much of the US bombing in Indochina.

The figures on the numbers of Americans killed in combat per week, per month, and per year were quite accurate (see further discussion below). There were figures on losses per day that were seriously inaccurate. There was an office at MACV that reported each day the number of Americans known to have been killed on the previous day, but this figure represented only those for whom a death report had moved fast enough through the system to have reached that office by the time it compiled the report. These seriously incomplete figures were not released to the press or the public, but they circulated to some extent at the upper levels of the government. President Lyndon Johnson probably did not understand that, when he was given a figure for the previous day's American dead, the number often was well below the actual death toll.

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Table 12.1 Republic of Vietnam armed forces strength, December 31 (Figures probably exaggerated)

	Army	Air Force	Navy	Marines	Regional Forces	Popular Forces	Total
1964	220,360	10,847	8,194	7,209	96,049	168,317	510,976
1965	267,877	12,778	14,559	7,380	132,221	136,398	571,213
1966	283,898	14,647	17,349	7,049	149,844	150,096	622,883
1967	303,000	16,000	16,000	8,000	151,000	149,000	643,000
1968	380,270	18,625	18,882	9,134	219,762	172,546	819,219
1969	416,278	36,469	30,143	11,528	260,455	214,383	969,256
1970	416,000	46,000	40,000	13,000	207,000	246,000	968,000
1971	407,963	49,475	42,207	14,312	283,947	246,814	1,044,718
1972	458,473	51,629	42,136	16,128	300,865	219,908	1,089,139

Sources: Military Assistance Command Vietnam, *Command History 1965*, Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC) No. ADA955669; *Command History 1967*, vol. I, DTIC No. ADA955104; *Command History 1969*, vol. II, DTIC No. ADA955380; *Command History 1972–1973*, vol. I, DTIC No. ADA955103. Figures for 1967 and 1970 are from Brigadier General James Lawton Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950–1972* (Washington, DC, 1986), 151, which tends to give lower figures than the MACV Command History.

The US government's figures for RVN strength (Table 12.1) were the RVN's official figures, and they exaggerated personnel strength by a margin that cannot be determined. One of the common forms of corruption in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) was to list more men on the roster for a unit than were actually serving in the unit. The commander could pocket part or all of the pay of the "ghost" and "ornamental" soldiers. General William Westmoreland estimated that they might make up 10 percent of the nominal strength of the RVN forces; John Paul Vann estimated 20 percent.[3] But no one could really know, and the extent of the problem surely varied from one section of the RVNAF, and one year, to another.

MACV discovered toward the end of 1967 that at least since the beginning of 1966 it had been seriously understating combat deaths in the RVNAF. MACV had been getting its data from RVNAF reports that counted only the men who had died promptly after being hit by enemy fire. Including the ones who had lived long enough to reach medical care, but then died of their wounds, raised the number of RVNAF combat deaths for 1966 from 9,469 to

3 Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965–1973* (Washington, DC, 1988), 40, 159, 229, 486 n. 51; General Cao Văn Viên, *Leadership* (Washington, DC, 1981), 117–18, 120, 123.

Table 12.2 Republic of Vietnam personnel killed by hostile action, 1965–1972

1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	Total
11,243	11,953	12,716	27,915	21,833	23,346	22,738	39,587	171,331

Source: Thomas Thayer, *War without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD, 2016), 105. The figures include deaths not only in the RVNAF as defined in Table 12.1, but also in paramilitary forces such as the Revolutionary Development Cadres.

11,953, and for the first eleven months of 1967 from 9,641 to 11,513.[4] The low figures had political significance, since they encouraged American complaints that the RVNAF was not doing its fair share of the fighting. The figures in Table 12.2, compiled after this error had been corrected, are reasonably accurate so far as is known.

In the last years of the war, after US forces had withdrawn and MACV had been replaced by the much smaller Defense Attaché's Office, that organization underestimated RVNAF combat deaths by a wider margin – something like a factor of two.[5]

Communist Losses

The infamous "body count" was among the most important of the Americans' statistical indicators. The American military, never permitted to launch large-scale ground invasions of Laos or North Vietnam, pinned much of its hope for victory on attrition of the communist forces in South Vietnam. If the communists' losses exceeded their ability to add new personnel, their strength would shrink and, if it shrank enough to make it obvious they had no chance of victory, they might abandon the struggle.

MACV was determined to present figures for enemy personnel losses, and to claim that those figures were based on actual data. By far its most important source of actual data was the counting of enemy bodies on the battlefield. MACV claimed that its figures for overall enemy personnel losses were based primarily on the body count, though there was one significant adjustment: MACV assumed that for every one hundred known enemy dead, an

4 OASD[SA]RP Southeast Asia Intelligence Section, *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War*, vol. VI, *Casualties and Losses*, ed. Thomas C. Thayer (Springfield, VA, 1975), 209–12.

5 Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore, 1983), 310–12; Stuart Herrington, *Peace with Honor? An American Reports on Vietnam, 1973–1975* (Novato, CA, 1983), 95.

additional twenty-eight (by 1967 this had become an additional thirty-five) would be so seriously wounded that they would die of their wounds after being evacuated from the battlefield, or would be permanently disabled.

MACV put heavy pressure on unit commanders to report high body counts. Not to do so compromised an officer's chances of promotion. Exaggeration of the body count, by officers who counted civilians who had been caught in the crossfire as enemy troops or simply invented figures, was common. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, after becoming famous as the commander of US forces in the 1991 war against Iraq, looked back with dismay at his days commanding a battalion in Vietnam. He said he and other officers "all knew that we had lied about body count":[6]

> Many times people would call me up on the radio after a battle and say, "What was your body count." I'd say, "I don't know what the body count was." They'd say, "Well, make one up. We have to report a body count."
>
> So, eventually, just to get them off your back, you'd say, "OK, the body count was 250."[7]

Officers who had served as generals in Vietnam have made comments such as: "The immensity of the false reporting is a blot on the honor of the Army." "A fake – totally worthless." "Often blatant lies."[8]

Wild exaggeration of the body counts did not imply serious exaggeration of overall communist personnel losses. It should have been obvious to anyone familiar with the nature of the war that not even half the communist military personnel who died would do so under circumstances that gave US and RVN forces an opportunity to see and count their bodies. The Americans used artillery and air bombardment on a huge scale; it was seldom practical to inspect the target areas afterward and count bodies. The death rate from disease must have been substantial. Even when infantry fought infantry, communist forces might carry off their dead, or the circumstances might not permit US, RVN, and allied troops to spread across the battlefield counting bodies.

The number of communist personnel who died without the Americans being able to count their bodies at least approximately balanced – perhaps more than balanced – the ones the Americans falsely claimed had been counted.

6 General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, on the ABC-TV show *20–20*, March 15, 1991.

7 "Schwarzkopf Calls Vietnam Body Count 'a Lie,'" United Press International, March 10, 1991, www.upi.com/Archives/1991/03/10/Schwarzkopf-calls-Vietnam-body-count-a-lie/7105668581200 (read June 27, 2021).

8 Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers: American Generals Reflect on Vietnam* (New York, 1991), 75.

Communist Strength

The evolution of the American estimates of communist military strength in South Vietnam was a complex story. Soon after MACV was established in 1962, officers there compiled an order of battle (OB) for the NLF – a listing of military units the existence of which was considered confirmed, with the best available information about the strength of each. The total came to about 20,000 NLF troops. The officers at MACV also estimated that there were at least 100,000 irregulars – guerrillas and militia. They considered it obvious that their listing must be incomplete. There was normally a considerable lag between the time a unit was formed and the time US intelligence got reliable information about it. So more units would be added as information about them was discovered. But as long as Harkins remained in command, he and his intelligence chief – determined to present an image of NLF weakness – tried to minimize upward revisions in the figures.

General Westmoreland replaced Harkins in June 1964. A month later, the figures for NLF strength were increased substantially. When the US ambassador passed the new figures to Washington, he said they reflected belated inclusion in the order of battle of units the existence of which had been suspected for years. He gave the impression he was not aware of significant units having been created recently.[9] Since NLF strength had in fact been increasing rapidly during recent months, the new figures must have been serious underestimates on the day they were issued.

During 1965 the number of intelligence analysts at MACV increased dramatically, and an order of battle section was established, assigned to update the OB on a continuing basis. At first the OB section devoted essentially all its attention to the communists' regular combat units, which it reported had 79,600 regular troops in January 1966. This figure was surely an underestimate, omitting some units recently added to the communist force structure, but it was the closest thing to a reliable figure for communist strength that MACV had ever issued. But the officers involved were also required to give numbers for other categories of communist personnel. The January 1966 report gave figures of 16,911 for support personnel, mostly transport and logistics, but also communications, medical corps, training, and headquarters personnel, without whom the combat units could not have functioned effectively; 103,573 for irregulars (full-time village guerrillas, and the part-time

9 Telegram from the US Embassy in Vietnam (Saigon 108) to State Department, July 15, 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. I, *Vietnam, 1964* (Washington, DC, 1992), doc. 233, 547.

"self-defense" and "secret self-defense" militias); and 39,175 for "political" (often called "infrastructure"), which included the Communist Party, and administrative personnel in areas where the NLF was enough in control to have an administration.[10] The figure for "political" remained unchanged to the last digit until October 1967. The figure for irregulars rose to 112,760 in May 1966, and then remained unchanged to the last digit until October 1967. These absurdly precise numbers were based on so little actual study that they did not really deserve even to be called guesses, which meant that the total for all categories did not really deserve even to be called a guess. MACV does not appear to have thought about the political risks that could result from including so unreliable a total figure in press briefings, which it did with increasing frequency in 1967.

By early 1967, MACV intelligence was aware that it was seriously underestimating guerrillas, militia, and infrastructure, and had analysts working to compile more valid estimates for those categories. By May the MACV J-2 (chief of intelligence), Major General Joseph McChristian, was ready to make the new numbers official. They would have increased the figure for "political" by about a factor of two, and the figures for guerrillas and militia by more than 50 percent. General Westmoreland, worried about the reactions of the press, Congress, and the president, blocked the change and ordered that the matter be reconsidered.

The CIA had been aware the MACV figures were unrealistically low, but had been waiting for McChristian to deal with the problem. By June it became apparent that was not going to happen. At a series of conferences in the summer, CIA representatives pushed for higher figures. MACV analysts, under command pressure, presented figures to other agencies that they believed were unrealistically low (one of them later published an account of this titled "Being Ordered to Lie"),[11] but even the lowest figures for which they could find any argument were leading toward a total for all categories of well over 400,000, at a time when the official OB total, which had been released to the press, was 297,000. Brigadier General Phillip Davidson, who had replaced McChristian as MACV J-2, told his officers, "I am sure that this headquarters will not accept a figure in excess of the current strength figure carried by the

10 Periodic Intelligence Report, January/June 1966, MACV Command Historian's Collection, Series II: MACV Staff Sections, J-2, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

11 Gains B. Hawkins, "Vietnam Anguish: Being Ordered to Lie," *Washington Post*, November 14, 1982, C1.

press."[12] General Creighton Abrams and General Westmoreland, the two top officers at MACV, said the media would react very badly to an increase in the figure for total enemy strength, and suggested that the NLF militias no longer be included in that figure.[13]

The September OB Summary, the last one that used the traditional categories, showed a total of 295,840. In the October OB Summary, the figures for guerrillas and support personnel rose significantly, but the total strength figure no longer included the militias or the "political" category, so it dropped to 235,852.

When Abrams and Westmoreland told intelligence officers that it was important for the figure for total enemy strength to be low, to project an image of success in the war, they suggested dropping categories out of the count. But the command preference for a low total also influenced the estimates for the categories that were not dropped. As early as August 15, Brigadier General Davidson told his officers, "The figure of combat strength and particularly of guerrillas must take a steady and significant downward trend as I am convinced this reflects true enemy status."[14] Within months there was significant downward pressure even on the figures for People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) regular troops. This was happening just as the communists were expanding their forces in preparation for the Tet Offensive of 1968, with a massive surge of PAVN troops coming down the Hồ Chí Minh Trail, and a smaller but significant increase in the strength of NLF units. The OB for January 31, 1968 – just at the point at which the Tet Offensive began – showed 55,744 men in PAVN units in South Vietnam. Within a month the officers responsible for the OB had officially revised that figure up to 77,800, but they did so very quietly (their report does not seem to have been transmitted even to the White House). By July they were admitting that PAVN strength in January had been 93,501.[15]

If MACV intelligence had acknowledged in January the way communist force strength was expanding, warnings of a communist offensive might have been taken more seriously, and the Tet Offensive might not have achieved

12 Davidson to Godding, August 19, 1967, #0250209002, B-198, Virtual Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas [hereafter cited as TTUVA].

13 Abrams to Wheeler, Sharp, and Westmoreland, August 20, 1967, #0240717031, TTUVA; Westmoreland to Wheeler and Sharp, August 20, 1967, #0250209002, TTUVA.

14 Brigadier General Phillip B. Davidson, August 15, 1967, #0240715002, TTUVA.

15 Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam, *Order of Battle Summary*, January 31, 1968, I-1; February 29, 1968, I-35; July 31, 1968, vol. II, I-32, in *Records of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam,* part 2, *Classified Studies from the Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam, 1965–1973* (Frederick, MD, 1988), reels 2, 2, 3.

the partial surprise that it did. And the fact that communist forces had been far stronger in January than MACV estimates had acknowledged helps to explain the communists' ability to sustain very heavy combat continuously from late January through late June (see below), despite the very heavy casualties they were suffering.

The CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency believed that MACV's OB was still underestimating communist strength in the second half of 1968 and into 1969, but far less information has been released about this period, so it is difficult to evaluate the validity of these charges. It is clear at least that, if MACV was still underestimating communist strength, it was not doing so by as wide a margin as it had in January 1968.

The Hamlet Evaluation System

During 1967 the United States began working on a very different indicator of success, a measurement of the extent to which the RVN controlled the villages of South Vietnam. The Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) was supposed to collect statistical data to evaluate the status of every hamlet in South Vietnam, considering both security – the extent to which NLF power and influence had been eliminated – and socioeconomic factors. HES sorted the hamlets into six categories. In category A hamlets the government had essentially eliminated the NLF and was functioning well, providing benefits to the people such as health care, education, and economic opportunity. Categories B and C represented reasonably secure government control, but there might be some NLF presence and somewhat less effective government services. In category D hamlets the NLF had a significant political and military presence at night. Category E hamlets were dominated by the NLF at night, and government programs had little effect even in daylight. Category VC hamlets were under unambiguous NLF control.

There were two factors biasing the ratings in an upward direction. By far the most important was that both Vietnamese and American officers whose careers were more likely to prosper if things seemed to be going well in the areas for which they were responsible had the ability to influence the ratings, making the situation look better than it was, and they often did so. The other was that, if a community was under complete NLF control, with no RVN hamlet administration, the RVN might simply not recognize the community as being a hamlet, and it might thus be omitted from the count of VC hamlets. The first HES report, dated March 15, 1967, described the situation as of January 31, and covered 11,830 hamlets. In the months that followed, the

Table 12.3 Hamlets by hamlet evaluation system category

	A	B	C	D	E	VC	Total
January 1967[a]	156	1,522	3,022	2,347	903	3,880	11,830
January 1968[b]	239	1,764	3,328	2,239	438	3,838	11,846
May 1968[c]	179	1,361	3,139	2,416	466	4,002	11,563
January 1969[d]	265	2,331	4,255	1,396	250	2,850	11,347
January 1970[e]	440	5,613	3,121	1,471	96	599	11,340

[a] Monthly Report of Revolutionary Development Progress: Hamlet, Population and Area Control for Period 1 January–31 January 1967, p. 3-1, #Fo1570001024, TTUVA.

[b] Monthly Pacification Status Report for January 1968, #Fo15700010647, TTUVA. There were an additional 916 hamlets categorized as "Other," which in most cases probably meant that the people who had been supposed to evaluate them had not done so.

[c] Monthly Pacification Status Report for May 1968, #Fo15700020007, TTUVA. There were an additional 1,160 hamlets categorized as "Other."

[d] Monthly Pacification Status Report for January 1969, #Fo15700020645, TTUVA. There were an additional 1,668 hamlets categorized as "Other."

[e] Monthly Pacification Status Report for February 1970, 6, #Fo15700040654, TTUVA.

Americans identified hundreds of additional hamlets that had not been on the RVN's lists of hamlets, and added these to the HES system.

Despite these problems, the HES ratings were probably more realistic than either the body count or MACV's estimates of communist personnel strength in South Vietnam. During 1967, the HES ratings showed a modest rate of improvement on average. The communists' general offensive expanded the territory under their control significantly in the early months of 1968, but at a cost of very heavy casualties that seriously weakened communist forces. During the second half of the year, pacification more than made up the ground that had been lost in the first half. In 1969 there were further huge gains in government control of the countryside. By the beginning of 1970, four-fifths of the hamlets were in categories A, B, and C, representing a reasonable degree of government control (Table 12.3). Less than 4 percent, however, were in category A. Under a policy called "fast-and-thin" pacification, establishing at least superficial government control in as many hamlets as possible took priority over deepening and strengthening the government's grip on areas where there was already some government control.

The hamlets under a reasonable degree of government control had larger populations, on average, than those that were heavily contested or under NLF control. There were some areas under NLF control from which almost the whole population had fled, primarily to escape bombing and shelling by US and RVN forces. So the percentage of population in category A, B, and

Table 12.4 Population of hamlets (thousands), by hamlet evaluation system category

	A	B	C	D	E	VC	Total
January 1967[a]	386	2,521	4,250	2,284	819	2,843	13,103
January 1968[b]	727	3,398	4,397	2,134	317	2,722	13,695
May 1968[c]	486	2,773	4,369	2,715	406	2,935	13,684
January 1969[d]	597	2,689	4,227	1,129	215	1,893	10,750
January 1970[e]	1,221	10,546	3,191	1,291	52	384	16,685

[a] Monthly Report of Revolutionary Development Progress: Hamlet, Population and Area Control for Period 1 January–31 January 1967, p. 3-1, #F015700010246, TTUVA.
[b] Monthly Pacification Status Report for January 1968, pp. 3-1 to 3-3, #F015700010647, TTUVA.
[c] Monthly Pacification Status Report for May 1968, pp. 1-1 to 1-3, #F015700020007, TTUVA.
[d] Monthly Pacification Status Report for January 1969, pp. 2-16 to 2-18, #F015700020645, TTUVA.
[e] Hamlet Evaluation System Summary Report as of February 28, 1970, enclosure 1, p. 1, #F015700040654, TTUVA; includes population in urban areas, not just hamlets.

C hamlets was significantly higher than the percentages of hamlets in those categories (Table 12.4).

The pacification of the countryside slowed in 1970 and 1971, and was reversed in 1972, but by that time the war was becoming more conventional in character, and the United States was judging the state of the war more by shifts in battlelines than by statistical indicators.

Retrospective: What the Statistics Show about the War

The statistics can clarify important aspects of the Vietnam War. It was, for the United States, a limited war. Comparing the Vietnam War with other limited wars shows the limits as surprisingly broad. Comparing what the United States did in Vietnam with what the United States (with its very large population and huge resources) would have been capable of doing makes the limits look rather narrow.

US Military Personnel

The number of US military personnel in South Vietnam at the beginning of 1961, when John Kennedy became president, is believed to have been about 900 or 1,000, but the US government did not release the figure. The Geneva Accords of 1954 had originally been interpreted as limiting the number of US military advisors in South Vietnam to 342. The United States had managed to

Table 12.5 Selective service inductions, US military personnel in South Vietnam, and US military personnel killed by hostile action

	Selective Service Inductions	US Military Personnel in Vietnam (December 31)	Killed by Hostile Action
1961	118,586	3,200	11
1962	82,060	11,300	31
1963	119,265	16,300	78
1964	112,386	23,300	147
1965	230,991	184,300	1,369
1966	382,010	385,300	5,008
1967	228,263	485,600	9,377
1968	296,406	536,100	14,589
1969	283,586	475,200	9,414
1970	162,746	334,600	4,221
1971	94,092	156,800	1,381
1972	49,514	24,200	300
1973	646	204	officially 237 (actually 19)[a]

[a] Official figure from *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1974* (Washington, DC, 1974), 317. Eighteen men were killed by hostile action in January 1973, and one died in January 1973 of wounds suffered in December 1972: from Defense Casualty Analysis System Extract Files, US National Archives, https://aad.archives.gov/aad/fielded-search.jsp?dt=2513&tf=F.

Source: www.sss.gov/history-and-records/induction-statistics/; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, various dates.

win acceptance of a revised interpretation raising the limit to 685, but it was violating even that higher limit, so it avoided announcing how many advisors it had in Vietnam.

Late in 1961 President Kennedy decided greatly to increase the number of advisors and also to send some military personnel – the most important being pilots – who without publicity would be conducting operations themselves, not just advising and training RVN forces. This made US violation of the Geneva limit so obvious that concealing the numbers would have been pointless, so from this point onward the United States published reasonably accurate figures on a regular basis (Table 12.5).

From 1962 to 1964 the number of US personnel was growing but not becoming huge. In 1965 President Johnson committed US forces much more openly to combat, and the number of personnel expanded more dramatically. It was more than 400,000 from January 1967 to August 1970, and peaked at 543,000 in April 1969. The total number of US military personnel who served in Vietnam at any point in the Vietnam War has been officially listed as 2,594,000.

This was an extraordinarily large force to have fought in what is generally considered to have been a limited war. US military strength in Korea remained below 300,000 for most of the Korean War, though it rose to 302,000 in July 1953, shortly before the end of that war. The Soviet force that fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s is believed to have numbered about 115,000. The fact that the United States sent so much larger a force to Vietnam seems particularly striking when one notes that Afghanistan directly bordered on the Soviet Union, so it was both more important and more accessible to the Soviet Union than Vietnam was to the United States, and that the Soviet Union had a larger population.

Relative to the capabilities of the United States, the force sent to Vietnam looks less impressive. It could easily have been made far larger if President Johnson had been willing to do as President Harry Truman had done in the Korean War: mobilize a large number of Reserve and National Guard personnel for active service, and make heavy use of conscription. Most of the personnel who served in Vietnam had volunteered for military service; only 34 percent of those killed by hostile action were conscripts.

President Johnson came very close to mobilizing a large number of Reserve and National Guard units when major escalation began. Indeed the Defense Department thought it had obtained his approval for this, but in late July 1965 he changed his mind. Without Reserve and National Guard personnel, the military had to increase its use of conscription. The rate at which men were drafted rose dramatically in September 1965, but did not rise as much as it could have; huge numbers of young men were allowed to remain in civilian life. During the Korean War, Truman had drafted 551,806 men in 1951, 438,479 in 1952, and 471,806 in 1953. Johnson was not willing to pay the political price of drafting so many. The most drafted in any year under Johnson was 382,010 in 1966. In no other year of the Vietnam War was it above 300,000, even though Johnson had a larger pool of young men from which to draw. In 1966, the number of males age twenty was 27 percent larger than it had been in 1951. In 1968, with the first of the "baby boom" generation reaching adulthood, the number of males age twenty was 63 percent larger than in 1951.[16]

By the beginning of 1968, the US Army was short enough of personnel to be having trouble keeping units in Vietnam up to their authorized strength. The intensification of combat that began with the Tet Offensive made the problem more acute. In late February Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

16 "A Century of Population Change in the Age and Sex Composition of the Nation," United States Census Bureau, www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/055.

General Earle Wheeler asked President Johnson to increase the number of American military personnel in Vietnam from the current 506,000 to about 732,000 by the end of the year. This would have required a large-scale mobilization of reservists. Johnson agreed to the mobilization of only 24,500, and increased the force in Vietnam only to 537,000 by the end of the year.

US Casualties

Figures released in 1985 showing 47,322 deaths of US military personnel by hostile action (also called "battle deaths" or "combat deaths") and 10,700 deaths by accident, illness, suicide, and so forth, for a total of 58,022, have been widely accepted.[17] Some sources give slightly different figures. The reasons include different decisions about the inclusion of deaths that occurred slightly outside the war zone or slightly after the end of the war. Among the deaths not caused by hostile action, the most common causes were aircraft crashes not caused by the enemy (3,247), vehicular crashes not caused by the enemy (1,104), and drowning or suffocation (1,020). Infectious diseases accounted for only 623.[18]

Despite the stereotype of Vietnam as a war fought by nineteen-year-olds, the median age of the American military personnel who died in the war was twenty-one. Thirteen percent of those who died in Vietnam were officers, and 87 percent enlisted.[19] African Americans were 12.5 percent of the dead, approximately equal to their proportion in the American population. Suggestions by some authors of considerably higher percentages are based partly on a focus on enlisted personnel, especially those in the army. Only 2 percent of the American officers who died in the war were African Americans, but 15 percent of the army enlisted personnel.[20] Those suggestions are based even more on the early years of the war. African Americans made up a large proportion of the soldiers in the first regular troop units sent to Vietnam in 1965, and thus a large proportion of the casualties in the early battles. This led to negative publicity, and the military responded by reducing the proportion of African Americans in combat units.

17 "Deaths by hostile action" and "killed in action" (KIA) are often treated as equivalent terms, but the US government often reserved "killed in action" for those who had died immediately after being struck by enemy fire, and had a separate category "died of wounds" for those who succumbed after days or weeks in a hospital. Both were included in "deaths by hostile action."

18 Department of Defense, *US Casualties in Southeast Asia: Statistics as of April 30, 1985* (Washington, DC, 1985), 1, 6, #2390403003, TTUVA.

19 Ibid., 2, 7–8.

20 Ibid., 2, 10.

Table 12.6 US military personnel killed by hostile action, 1967–1969

	1967	1968	1969
January	520	1,202	795
February	662	2,124	1,073
March	944	1,543	1,316
April	710	1,410	847
May	1,233	2,169	1,209
June	830	1,146	1,100
July	781	813	638
August	535	1,080	785
September	775	1,053	477
October	733	600	377
November	881	703	446
December	774	749	341

Sources: Figures released by Comptroller, Office of the Secretary of Defense, in Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff (eds.), *The Air War in Indochina*, rev. ed. (Boston, 1972), 268–70.

The only way in which the figures the US government has released on US deaths are known to have been significantly misleading involved the cases of men who were killed under circumstances that did not permit quick recovery of the body. The government was reluctant to declare a man dead if it did not have his body. It often waited years, and then treated the date of the declaration as if it were the date of death. The result was to make the official figures (Table 12.5) slightly lower than the actual number of deaths for the years up to 1972, and much higher than the actual number for the year 1973.

The period when US forces were in the heaviest combat, suffering the greatest losses, ran from January 1968 to June 1969. The communist offensive that is misleadingly called "Mini-Tet" produced the highest monthly toll, in May 1968. The Tet Offensive produced the second-highest, in February. But the number of Americans killed by hostile action was higher than 1,000 in twelve of those eighteen months. It was higher than 1,000 in only a single month outside that period (Table 12.6).

The timing of the heaviest combat can be described more precisely using weeks rather than months. There were four periods when the numbers of American combat deaths were highest. The longest and most intense was the twenty-one weeks of absolutely uninterrupted very heavy combat, killing an average of 403 Americans per week, from January 29 to June 22, 1968. The Tet

and "Mini-Tet" Offensives came at the beginning and toward the end of this period, but there was not a single week in between when combat subsided to normal or near-normal levels.

The other three were shorter and less intense. There were four weeks with an average of 294 American combat deaths per week from April 30 to May 27, 1967. There were six weeks averaging 278 American combat deaths from August 18 to September 28, 1968. And there were eighteen weeks from February 23 to June 28, 1969, with an average of 275 American combat deaths per week. There was no other period of four or more weeks when American deaths by hostile action averaged even as high as 230 per week.

It was during the last of these periods that President Richard Nixon ordered commanders in Vietnam to hold down the casualty level by being less aggressive in ground combat, and announced that he was withdrawing American forces from Vietnam under the policy that came to be called "Vietnamization."

US Bombing

The Pentagon was repeatedly embarrassed when it gave congressional committees information about American bombing in Indochina that it later discovered had been inaccurate. Finally US Air Force (USAF) Major General Raymond Furlong was assigned to supervise studies that would produce an accurate picture of what American aircraft had done where, even in operations (the most famous but not the only case being Operation Menu, the secret US bombing of Cambodia from March 1969 to May 1970) for which records had been deliberately and systematically falsified. Among the products of Furlong's studies was a set of four tables showing the number of attack sorties flown and the tonnage of munitions delivered, by fighter-bombers and by B-52 heavy bombers, each month from 1964 through 1973 on targets in South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Cambodia, northern Laos, and southern Laos (except that northern and southern Laos were lumped together up through September 1965). These figures were not perfect. They omitted munitions expended by the USAF First Air Commando Squadron, using planes disguised with Vietnamese Air Force markings, up through May 1964. They appear to have omitted at least most, perhaps all, of the munitions expended by aircraft other than B-52s and fighter-bombers – helicopters, fixed-wing gunships, cargo planes dropping bombs, and perhaps even B-57 bombers. There were also minor errors and inconsistencies. But they are the best statistics now available on the American air war. The tonnage figures are summarized in Table 12.7.

Table 12.7 Aerial munitions expended in the Vietnam War by US fighter-bombers and B-52s (Tons)

	South Vietnam	North Vietnam	Southern Laos	Northern Laos	Cambodia	Total
1964	3,250	154	----------36----------		0	3,440
1965	118,360	40,554	--------15,607---------		0	174,521
1966	237,332	128,904	65,434	8,186	0	439,856
1967	473,038	246,328	116,999	10,903	0	847,268
1968	793,663	227,331	206,728	31,505	0	1,259,227
1969	633,562	659	433,365	81,670	70,531	1,219,787
1970	237,968	2,467	393,676	59,580	94,207	787,898
1971	113,395	2,683	401,944	45,505	63,514	627,041
1972	551,453	215,631	96,973	47,154	53,412	964,623
1973	40,931	15,397	40,495	37,540	257,465	391,828

Source: House Committee on the Judiciary, *Statement of Information*, Book XI, *Bombing of Cambodia* (Washington, DC, 1974), 93–5, 100–3.

These figures represent bombing on a huge scale, larger than that of World War II, the next largest air war in history (see Table 12.8).

The heaviest bombing focused on the communist forces in South Vietnam, which directly threatened American troops; South Vietnam became the most heavily bombed country in history. Indeed what the United States and Britain, combined, dropped in the whole European theater in World War II did not match what the United States dropped in South Vietnam. The bombing of Laos focused mostly on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail in southeastern Laos. It was very heavy, enough to make Laos the second most heavily bombed country in history. The United States expended more air munitions on North Vietnam than it had expended on Germany during World War II, but adding the figure for British munitions makes Germany the third most heavily bombed country in history, leaving North Vietnam as number four or number five (figures for German and Soviet forces' munitions used in the Soviet Union during World War II are difficult to find).

Cambodia was a sideshow for the Americans, who bombed it but not very heavily from 1969 to the beginning of 1973. Then there was an inefficient spasm of much heavier bombing from March to August 1973, which did not produce military results in proportion to its scale because the Americans did not have adequate data about the locations of communist forces, but which lifted the total to 539,129 tons, more than three times what the United States dropped on Japan in World War II. One could add the tonnage of conventional bombs that

Table 12.8 Selected bomb tonnages for World War II and the Vietnam War

World War II	
Germany	
US Bombing	664,073
British Bombing	755,531
US plus British	1,419,604
Entire European Theater	
US Bombing	1,463,423
British Bombing	1,307,117
US plus British	2,770,540
US Bombing of Japan	161,425
US Bombing in Entire Pacific Theater	583,962
Vietnam War	
South Vietnam	3,202,952
North Vietnam	880,108
Laos	2,093,300
Cambodia	539,129
Total	6,715,489

Sources: United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Statistical Appendix to Overall Report (European War)* (Washington, DC, 1947), viii, 5; United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *The Effects of Strategic Bombing on Japan's War Economy* (Washington, DC, 1946), 35; House Committee on the Judiciary, *Statement of Information*, Book XI, *Bombing of Cambodia* (Washington, DC, 1974), 93–5, 100–3. The World War II figures are for tons of "bombs" and those for the Vietnam War are for tons of "munitions." It is unclear whether this reflects a real difference in what was counted.

would have had the same explosive power as the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, treating one kiloton of nuclear explosion as equivalent to about 2,200 tons of conventional bombs, since slightly less than half the weight of a typical conventional bomb is explosive; most of the weight is steel casing. Even by this computation the Americans dropped only the equivalent of about 240,000 tons on Japan, well under half what they dropped on Cambodia. A widely cited study proposed a much higher figure for Cambodia, 2,756,941 tons, based on computerized databases of bombing missions compiled by the US military during the war. But those databases contained so many errors, such as B-52 missions delivering bomb loads of fifty or more tons per aircraft, that the authors of the study later disavowed their high figure.[21]

21 Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan, "Bombs over Cambodia," *The Walrus*, October 2006, 62–9; Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan, "Roots of US Troubles in Afghanistan: Civilian Bombing Casualties and the Cambodian Precedent," *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 8, 26, 4 (June 2010), 6. Even thirty-five tons would have been an impossible load for a B-52.

One often sees the American use of air power in Indochina described as "limited," and there were indeed significant limits. But the quantity of American bombing in Indochina dwarfed what the United States had done in World War II, usually considered a "total war." The scale of American bombing reached its maximum in the months after the Tet Offensive. In a famous speech of March 31, 1968, in which President Johnson said he would not run for reelection, he said he was "reducing – substantially reducing – the present level of hostilities." He particularly mentioned the bombing of North Vietnam. Some authors got the impression that he had "halted the bombing." But in March 1968, the month leading up to the speech, the United States had dropped 10,698 tons on North Vietnam. In April the tonnage did not decline as he had implied it would; it almost doubled to 19,705 tons. The total for the seven months from April through October was higher than for any previous seven-month period of the war.

Perhaps more important was what happened to the air war in Indochina as a whole. The largest aerial munitions tonnage for Indochina before the Tet Offensive had been 83,073 tons, in January 1968. By March it was 97,642 tons. In April it was 112,913 tons. This increase of more than 15,000 tons, immediately following the speech, was the largest month-to-month increase of Johnson's whole presidency. The average for the seventeen months from April 1968 through August 1969 was 109,545 tons per month. Not until September 1969 did the figure drop back to the levels of before Johnson's speech. The monthly tonnage continued to decline, reaching a low of 37,490 tons for October 1971, but then increased again. It reached a second peak of 103,720 tons in August 1972, almost as high as the 1968–9 peak.

In December 1972, the month of Operation Linebacker II, sometimes called the "Christmas bombing," the United States used 81,042 tons of aerial munitions in Indochina, not an especially high figure. Of this, 36,244 tons fell in North Vietnam, the second-highest monthly figure of the war, exceeded only by the 39,714 tons dropped on North Vietnam in July 1968 shortly after President Johnson's 1968 speech. In the actual Linebacker II, December 18–24 and 26–29, the United States dropped about 20,000 tons, significantly more (though probably not 50 percent more) than had been dropped on North Vietnam in any previous eleven- or twelve-day period.

Comparative Death Tolls

About 58,000 American soldiers died in the war, of whom about 47,000 were killed by hostile action. The Republic of Vietnam lost about 171,000 soldiers killed by hostile action from 1965 to 1972. The numbers who were killed by

hostile action after 1972, and the number who died of other causes, would have added substantially to this number. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam has stated that communist forces lost 1.1 million dead and 300,000 missing during the war.[22] The fact that these numbers are rounded off to the nearest 100,000 suggests that they are only rough estimates, not based on actual data. They are not obviously inconsistent with the American claim that 851,000 communist soldiers were killed by hostile action from 1965 to 1972.[23]

Unsatisfactory though the figures for RVN and communist losses may be, they do point to some fundamental truths about the war. Comparison of Table 12.2 with Table 12.5 shows that the RVN lost somewhat more men killed by hostile action than the Americans did in 1967, almost twice as many in 1968, and more than twice as many in every other year of the war. Reasons for the difference include: (1) The RVN was engaged in bloody ground combat for a much longer period. The United States suffered significant losses in ground combat only from mid-1965 to late 1971. (2) The RVN had more military personnel overall in South Vietnam, and ground troops formed a larger percentage of the RVN forces than of the Americans. More people in harm's way translated to larger losses, even during the years when American losses were heaviest. (3) Seriously wounded RVN personnel were not as likely as Americans to be taken quickly to life-saving medical care.

On the battlefields of South Vietnam, the US and RVN forces enjoyed a monopoly on air power. They usually had a substantial advantage in heavy weaponry on the ground, and they had far more lavish supplies of ammunition. The result of this huge difference in weapons and munitions, plus better medical care for US and RVN forces, was what could have been expected. The number of communist soldiers who died was something like twenty times the number of Americans, and surely more than twice as large – perhaps much more than twice as large – as the combined total of US and RVN losses.

22 Viện Lịch sử quân sự Việt Nam [Military History Institute of Vietnam], *Lịch sử kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước, 1954–1975* [*History of the Resistance War against America for National Salvation, 1954–1975*], vol. VIII, *Toan thang* [*Total Victory*], 3rd ed. (Hanoi, 2015), 513.

23 Thomas Thayer, *War without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD, 2016), 104.