# Toward a Better Understanding of Attrition: The Korean and Vietnam Wars

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Abstract

This article attempts to provide a historically accurate description of attrition as an operational strategy. The Korean and Vietnam Wars contain prominent and commonly recognized examples of attrition. These examples clash with the popular image of attrition as a futile and bloody slogging match in which a commander ruthlessly trades the lives of his men in order to weaken the enemy at a relatively favorable rate. In these conflicts, attrition was a basic process of warfare, characterized by a variety of methods. Although not necessarily optimal, it was a useful alternative to other operational strategies that were too costly or risky. Accordingly, the popular image of attrition—shared by many historians, political scientists, and military officers—may not reflect the actual history of attrition.

WITHIN the study of warfare, attrition has a poor reputation. Popularly, the term denotes futile and bloody slogging matches, epitomized by the Western Front of the First World War. Many historians, political scientists, and military officers characterize a "strategy of attrition" as one that attempts to bleed the enemy white in a series of unimaginative and costly battles. A commander trades the lives of his men in order to weaken the enemy at a relatively favorable rate. This popular image of attrition begs the question of why any but the most ruthless commander would ever adopt attrition. Analysis of the use of attrition as an operational strategy in the Korean (1950–53) and Vietnam

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(1965–73) wars provides two answers to this question. First, commanders had few viable alternatives. Second, historically, attrition was not nearly as distasteful as the popular image outlined above. Attrition within these two cases did not resemble the popular image. Thus, what many academics, commanders, and politicians currently think of as attrition is vastly different from its history in the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

Why study attrition? Because, without a study of attrition, there is a gaping hole in the historiography of warfare. Attrition is one method of waging war, comparable to guerrilla, maneuver, or nuclear warfare. These other methods of warfare have received their due share of historical study. Although many historians have made important observations regarding attrition within broader works, there have been no in-depth studies of attrition.[1] Yet proponents of attrition include such figures central to strategic studies as the Duke of Wellington, Carl von Clausewitz, Hans Delbrück, William Slim, André Beaufre, and Basil Liddell Hart.[2] Several major wars have witnessed the implementation of attrition in at least one campaign. Examples include the Peninsular War (1807–14), 1812 invasion of Russia, Battle of Verdun (1916), Battle of Britain (1940), Battle of El Alamein (1942), and the Egyptian-Israeli War of Attrition (1965–73).

This article examines attrition as implemented by the United States in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. It makes three arguments. First, the popular image of attrition is not representative of the Korean and Vietnam cases. American commanders were never willing to expend their soldiers' lives in order to bleed the enemy white. Furthermore, the popular image presumes that a common and coherent strategy of attrition, with well-defined characteristics, has been implemented repeatedly over history. Yet the history of attrition in Korea and Vietnam is the compartmentalized progression of various individuals' ideas rather than the

1. Brian Bond, *The Pursuit of Military Victory: From Napoleon to Saddam Hussein* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Russell F. Weigley, *The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Victory from Breitenfeld to Waterloo* (London: Pimlico, 1993); Hew Strachan, "Attrition," *The Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

2. Wellington to B. Sydenham, 7 December 1811, *The Dispatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington During his Various Campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, the Low Countries, and France,* vol. 5, enlarged edition, ed. John Gurwood (London: John Murray, 1852), 395; Carl von Clausewitz, *On War,* ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 106-7; Hans Delbrück, *History of the Art of War: Within the Framework of Political History,* trans. Walter Renfroe (London: Greenwood Press, 1975), 4:108–9, 291, 293–94, 299, 309, 375, 423; William Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (London: Papermac, 1986), 315; André Beaufre, *Deterrence and Strategy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965); B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Meridian, 1991), 10, 13–14, 27, 114–19, 321.

unbroken evolution of a coherent doctrine, resulting in two different operational strategies instead of one clear one.

Second, nevertheless, a common idea of attrition, if not a definitive doctrine, existed between the Korean and Vietnam wars. The underlying process was the gradual and piecemeal destruction of the enemy's military capability, which is a basic element of warfare. Tactically, it merely required killing the enemy—directly or indirectly, rather than more involved objectives, such as capturing terrain, effecting a breakthrough, or enacting an encirclement. A variety of methods bring about the gradual destruction of an enemy, leading to major differences between attrition in Korea and Vietnam. Conventional forces, rather than guerrillas, terrorists, special forces, or other unconventional forces, primarily conducted attrition.

Third, a review of the Korean and Vietnam cases reveals that two factors played a key role in the implementation of attrition: strategic and operational constraints, and the presence of individuals prepared to adapt to those constraints. In Korea and Vietnam, U.S. decision makers faced constraints within their strategic and operational environment, such as the risk of escalation or numerical inferiority, that restricted the expected effectiveness of alternatives to attrition. In this context, the United States turned to attrition to attain its military objectives. However, constraints alone did not cause the implementation of attrition, which would not have occurred if decision makers, particularly General William C. Westmoreland and General Matthew B. Ridgway, had not been willing to recognize the constraints and had not preferred attrition as a means of overcoming them.

Together, these three arguments suggest that attrition needs to be considered from a new perspective. The Korean and Vietnam wars contain prominent and commonly recognized examples of attrition. The divergence of these examples from the popular image of attrition casts doubt on the general accuracy of that image. The current understanding of attrition within history, political science, and the military may not be representative of the general history of attrition. Attrition probably needs to be considered not as a sophisticated and set operational doctrine employed repeatedly over history, but as a basic process in warfare that has been conceptualized in a variety of different ways. Moreover, the Korean and Vietnam cases provide evidence that attrition has not been conceived as a bloody and futile strategy, disregarding more effective alternatives, but as a useful means of adapting to difficult constraints. Attrition's role as an outlet for the use of force should be recognized.

This article is concerned only with attrition purposefully conceptualized and implemented as an operational strategy. It does not analyze attrition as an outcome, when operations result in stalemate, slow gains, and heavy losses. Just because "attrition," in terms of the outcome,

occurred in a war does not mean that a commander intended it to occur.[3] Similarly, it is not concerned with attrition as a synonym for the tactical exchange of losses, as it is often used in mathematical models.[4]

Operational strategy is the design for attaining the specific objects set by strategy, which determines a state's political aims and the means to attain them, usually including the way in which the enemy will be forced into submission.[5] Generally, strategy addresses how the enemy nation as a whole is to be defeated, while operational strategy deals with specific segments of the enemy armed forces. To borrow from Russell F. Weigley, operational strategy encompasses "the planning, organizing, and direction of specific campaigns, intermediate between the tactical realm of battles and the strategic realm at the highest level of military decision making."[6] Examples of other operational strategies are maneuver warfare, counterinsurgency, and guerrilla warfare.

## The Popular Image of Attrition

As noted in the first paragraph, the popular image of attrition is of a brutal and futile slogging match. This notion of attrition derives from writings on maneuver warfare, which seeks to cause enemy armed forces to collapse by placing them in a disadvantageous position on the battlefield. In contrast to frontal assaults or cautious advances, daring and mobile operations seize the initiative and attack the enemy where least expected.[7] Examples of maneuver warfare are the German blitzkrieg during the Second World War, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur's Inchon operation and advance into North Korea in 1950, and Israeli

3. For a discussion of attrition as an unintentional outcome, see Gary D. Sheffield, "Blitzkrieg and Attrition: Land Operations in Europe 1914–1945," *Warfare in the Twentieth Century: Theory and Practice,* ed. Colin McInnes and Gary D. Sheffield (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 51–79.

4. Frederick William Lanchester, "Mathematics in Warfare," *The World of Mathematics,* ed. James Newman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956); John Battilega and Judith Grange, eds., *The Military Applications of Modeling* (Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio: Air Force Institute of Technology Press, 1984), 63–111.

5. Liddell Hart, *Strategy,* 319–33.

6. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1973), xviii.

7. Recent writings on maneuver warfare include: Wallace Franz, "Maneuver: The Dynamic Element of Combat," *Military Review* 63 (May 1983): 2–12; Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver-Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1991); Richard Simpkin, *Race to the Swift: Thoughts on Twenty-First Century Warfare* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1985); William Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook* (London: Waterview Press, 1985); Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London: Frank Cass, 1997).

operations in the 1967 Six Day War. Maneuver warfare became especially popular in the U.S. armed forces in the late 1970s as a decisive and relatively low-casualty method for thwarting a Soviet invasion of Western Europe.[8] Military and academic writings defined attrition as a polar opposite to maneuver warfare. This definition has since been accepted throughout Western armed forces and in most academic writings.[9]

Proponents of maneuver warfare portrayed attrition as a direct, protracted, bloody, and unimaginative operational strategy. Frontal assaults and overwhelming firepower are used to attack the enemy directly in a test of strength, targeting strong instead of weak points. A breakthrough is not the objective. The enemy is worn down until he retreats or is physically destroyed.[10] By comparison, maneuver warfare attempts to use mobility and the exploitation of weak spots to cause the collapse of resistance, circumventing the wholesale destruction of the enemy armed forces.

This article examines four assertions of the popular image of attrition in detail. First, allegedly, achieving victory through attrition is expensive, entailing heavy casualties and expenditure of resources through engaging the enemy in costly battle.[11] Repeated frontal assaults on enemy strong points naturally incur heavy casualties. Consequently, a proponent of attrition must be willing to suffer heavier losses than the enemy.[12] Edward N. Luttwak wrote in *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace:* "It is understood that the enemy's reciprocal attrition will have to be absorbed. There can be no victory in this style of war without overall

8. William Lind, "Some Doctrinal Questions for the United States Army," *Military Review* 77 (January-February 1997): 135–44; Ernest Szabo, "Attrition vs. Maneuver and the Future of War," *Armor,* September-October 2002, 39–41.

9. One exception to this rule is writing on the First World War. A number of historians present a more nuanced description of attrition. See David French, *British Strategy and War Aims, 1914–1916* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986); David French, "The Meaning of Attrition, 1914–1916," *English Historical Review* 103 (April 1988): 385–406; Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson, 1914–1918* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); and Hew Strachan, "From Cabinet War to Total War: The Perspective of Military Doctrine, 1861–1948," *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918,* ed. Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

10. Edward Luttwak, "The Operational Level of War," *International Security* 5 (Winter 1980–81): 63.

11. John Mearsheimer, "Maneuver, Mobile Defense, and the NATO Central Front," *International Security* 6 (Winter 1981–82): 106; H. Hayden, ed., *Warfighting: Maneuver Warfare in the U.S. Marine Corps* (London: Greenhill Books, 1995), 50.

12. John Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), 34.

superiority in attritional capacity, and there can be no cheap victories, in casualties or material loss, relative to the enemy's strength."[13]

Second, effective attrition requires numerical or material superiority over an opponent in order to endure heavy casualties and expenditure of economic resources.[14] Attrition is the method of the strong, not the weak. John J. Mearsheimer wrote in *Conventional Deterrence:*

> the attacker must believe that he has enough soldiers and equipment to compensate for his heavier losses, a point suggesting that success in a war of attrition largely depends on the size of the opposing forces. Allowing for the asymmetry in losses between offense and defense, the side with greater manpower and a larger material base will eventually prevail.[15]

Third, on the operational level, attrition is a factory-like process in which enemy strong points and concentrations are targeted and destroyed systematically by an overwhelming volume of shells and bombs (in addition to frontal assaults). Movement mainly serves to apply firepower, not to gain an operational advantage.[16] Luttwak gave a representative definition of attrition:

> Attrition is war waged by industrial methods. The enemy is treated as a mere array of targets, and success is to be obtained by the cumulative effect of superior firepower and superior strength. The greater the attrition content of a style of war, the more will routinized techniques of target acquisition, movement, and resupply suffice, along with a repetitive tactical repertoire. It is understood that the enemy's reciprocal attrition will have to be absorbed.[17]

As Hew Strachan has noted, economic preponderance, rather than military prowess, supposedly ensures victory.[18]

Fourth, attrition seeks the total annihilation of the enemy. The enemy is worn down until all his forces are destroyed or he decides to surrender rather than face continued losses. Limited aims, such as compelling ceasefire negotiations or defending territory, are almost never listed as objectives.[19] Paul Huth, a political scientist, echoed this thinking in his article "Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War":

13. Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 92.
14. Hayden, ed., *Warfighting,* 50.
15. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence,* 34.
16. Hayden, ed., *Warfighting,* 49–50, 67.
17. Luttwak, *Strategy,* 92.
18. Strachan, "Attrition," 105.
19. Hayden, ed., *Warfighting,* 36; Sheffield, "Blitzkrieg and Attrition," 51; Leonhard, *Art of Maneuver,* 19.

> The objective of a strategy of attrition is . . . decisive defeat of the enemy's armed forces. With a strategy of attrition the attacker anticipates not a series of rapid and decisive victories but instead a protracted conflict in which the goal is to wear down and outlast the adversary by being able to withstand heavy military losses better.[20]

Exponents of the popular image of attrition never fully explain why any commander would implement such a wasteful operational strategy. Most writers simply claim that attrition is implemented because its proponents have numerical and material superiority over their enemy.[21] This explanation is hardly satisfactory because it does not elucidate why a commander, even with an overwhelming preponderance in men or material, would not try to reduce his costs. The reason implicit in most writings for why attrition has been implemented is that the commander concerned was foolish. Luttwak hinted that attrition is mindlessly simple: "the larger the force that is deployable, the greater its attritive capacity. At the operational level . . . little more was needed than to coordinate the tactical actions which in turn were simple in nature, consisting mainly of frontal attacks."[22] Implicitly, a brilliant or ingenious commander would not employ such an operational strategy. Indeed, Richard E. Simpkin derogatively labeled proponents of attrition as "addicts of attrition" to be compared with "masters of manoeuvre."[23] More explicitly, Robert R. Leonhard, in *The Art of Maneuver,* espoused the claim of David Palmer, a Vietnam War historian, that:

> Attrition is not a strategy. It is, in fact, irrefutable proof of the absence of any strategy. A commander who resorts to attrition admits his failure to conceive of an alternative. He rejects warfare as an art and accepts it on the most nonprofessional terms imaginable. He uses blood in lieu of brains.[24]

## Case Studies

Two examples of attrition, respectively from the Korean and Vietnam wars, were selected as case studies for this article. In the Korean War, from December 1950 to April 1951, the United States and the United Nations Command (UNC) formulated and implemented an operational strategy of attrition following the Chinese intervention into the conflict. In the Vietnam War, the United States gradually formulated and imple-

20. Paul Huth, "Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War," *American Political Science Review* 82 (June 1988): 427.
21. Hayden, ed., *Warfighting,* 37.
22. Luttwak, "The Operational Level of War," 77.
23. Simpkin, *Race to the Swift,* 20, 73–74.
24. Leonhard, *Art of Maneuver,* 76.

mented an operational strategy of attrition over 1965, as the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese increasingly won victories on the battlefield. Several historical sources recognize both as examples of attrition.[25] Consequently, their characteristics should be reflected in the popular image of attrition. Any divergence casts doubt upon the accuracy of the popular image. Furthermore, analysis of these cases provides a commonly accepted basis for a tentative definition of attrition and explanation of why it has been implemented.

Korea and Vietnam are also strong cases for testing the continuity of attrition. They occurred during the Cold War under certain similar strategic constraints. National and organizational similarities—both involved the United States and the U.S. Army—should, intuitively, reinforce continuity between the two cases. Indeed, Scott Gartner and Marissa Myers emphasized the continuity between attrition in Korea and Vietnam, writing: "in Vietnam, the United States Army's use of attrition strategy and body counts demonstrated a continuation of policies previously established during the Korean War, and not the origination of a new measure that manifested a unique political and military situation."[26] On the contrary, major differences existed between the attrition of Vietnam and that of Korea. Attrition in Vietnam did not descend from its Korean precursor. The lack of continuity between two such strongly connected cases casts doubt upon attempts to define a single coherent strategy of attrition.

## Attrition and the Korean War

Attrition became the operational strategy of the United States and United Nations forces fighting in Korea in early 1951. The risk of escalation combined with numerical inferiority left U.S. decision makers with few viable alternatives. In this environment, General Ridgway (the Eighth Army commander until he succeeded MacArthur as head of the UNC in April 1951) and the principal decision makers in Washington accepted the inapplicability of traditional operational methods and seized upon attrition as an outlet for the use of force.

25. Matthew Ridgway, *The Korean War* (New York: Da Capo, 1967); David Rees, *Korea: The Limited War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964); Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: US Performance in the Vietnam Conflict* (London: Westview Press, 1986); Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

26. Scott Gartner and Marissa Myers, "Body Counts and 'Success' in the Vietnam and Korean Wars," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 25 (Winter 1995): 377, 379, 381.

The Korean War began in June 1950 when North Korean forces invaded South Korea. The United States and the United Nations intervened to halt the North Korean aggression. Over the course of the first five months of the Korean War, the United Nations Command and the United States, under General MacArthur's tutelage as commander of the UNC, implemented an aggressive operational strategy that emphasized decisive victory and the total annihilation of the enemy armed forces. It was essentially maneuver warfare, exemplified by the amphibious outflanking movement at Inchon in September and the subsequent drive north across the Thirty-eighth Parallel, which marked the border between South Korea and North Korea. Annihilating the enemy had been a characteristic of U.S. strategy throughout the Civil War, the First World War, and the Second World War.[27] Unfortunately, MacArthur's combination of annihilation and maneuver was operationally risky because advancing aggressively exposed forward units to counterattack. Furthermore, attempting to annihilate the military power of North Korea tended to threaten its patrons, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union. Indeed, elements of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, calling themselves the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV), intervened in the war late in November 1950. In the opening campaign, the CPV nearly destroyed the UNC ground forces, which had become overextended in their advance toward North Korea's border with China. The Eighth Army fell into a panicked retreat across the Thirty-eighth Parallel.

The defeat presented decision makers in Washington, D.C., with a strategic dilemma. Surrendering South Korea to the advancing Communists was distasteful. However, continuing to fight seemed futile. The operational strategy of the preceding months was not viable. The UNC forces had risked and ultimately suffered heavy casualties in risky maneuvers and bold advances. With an impressive numerical superiority, the Chinese could sustain far greater losses than the UNC. Ridgway would later write that reckless advances were susceptible to entrapment by the numerically superior Communists.[28] The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) did not want to sacrifice large numbers of American lives. Supported by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the JCS feared that the Communist goal in Korea was to contain U.S. forces in order to weaken the defense of Western Europe.[29] Korea might merely be a diversion in preparation for a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. Thus, U.S. forces needed to stabilize the situation in Korea without incurring heavy casualties.

27. Ibid., 382.

28. Ibid., 385.

29. JCS Meeting, 1 December 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950,* vol. 6, *United States Policy in the Korean Crisis: Korea* (Washington: GPO, 1976), 1246. Cited hereafter as *FRUS 1950*; CIA Memo, 2 December 1950, ibid., 1309.

Furthermore, continued fighting in Korea risked escalating the conflict into a wider and heightened war with China, or, worse, the Soviet Union. The U.S. National Security Council (NSC) met on 28 November 1950, in reaction to the Chinese offensive. George C. Marshall, the Secretary of Defense, was greatly concerned about avoiding a general war with the Soviet Union or China. He suggested that the UNC hold a defensive line in South Korea and not return to MacArthur's operational strategy, which was too aggressive. It had countenanced aggressive outflanking movements and the outright invasion of North Korea. Such actions now seemed likely to invite expanded Chinese intervention or, worse, Soviet entry into the war. Marshall also disapproved of other actions that might further inflame the situation, including violating Communist Chinese territory and deploying Nationalist Chinese troops in support of the UN effort.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, chaired by General of the Army Omar N. Bradley, and Dean Acheson, Secretary of State, agreed that it was necessary for the United States to avoid being pulled into a larger war.[30] Dean Rusk, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, drafted his own set of limitations a few days later. Rusk's goals were to increase the security of the UNC forces, avoid a general war, localize the current action to the Korean peninsula, end the conflict quickly in order to disengage the fighting forces, and maintain a solid front with U.S. allies.[31] Thus, the principal defense and foreign policy decision makers, minus the president, had agreed on the need to adopt limited aims that would mitigate the risk of escalation. The consensus to conduct a limited war was solidified at the meeting of President Harry S. Truman and Prime Minister Clement Attlee of Great Britain in early December 1950. They resolved to fight a limited war and hold the UNC position in Korea as long as possible. The resulting Truman-Attlee communiqué on 8 December called for negotiations with the Communists.[32]

The United States now needed a military strategy that would fulfill the limited aims of stabilizing the situation without escalating the war. Within the State Department, Dean Rusk's Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs first noted the potential of attrition. Examining the relationship between limited aims and military action, Edmund Clubb, Director of the Office of Chinese Affairs, wrote to Rusk:

> The military action itself, as carried out against the UN forces, will constitute an attritive drain upon the resources of the Chinese nation. If it be argued that the Chinese are readily able to meet

30. NSC Meeting, 28 November 1950, ibid., 1243, 1246.

31. Conversation of Lucius Battle and Dean Acheson, 1 December 1950, ibid., 1301.

32. Truman-Attlee Communiqué, 8 December 1950, ibid., 1477.

> drains on their manpower whereas the Occidental UN Member States supporting the operation are not, it is on the other hand to be noted that the Chinese nation lacks anything approaching the same capacity to meet drains on its material resources.[33]

Then, on 21 December 1950, Rusk wrote a memorandum that laid out military strategy and specific political objectives for the limited war. Militarily, MacArthur would hold his position as long as losses were not too great. Politically, a cease-fire would be sought near the Thirty-eighth Parallel.[34] Rusk pressed this strategy at a meeting with Truman, the JCS, Acheson, and Marshall in late December. There, Rusk connected gaining a cease-fire with attrition. Alluding to Clubb's idea of attrition, he said that the point of military action was: "To make it in the interest of the Chinese Communists to accept some stabilization by making it so costly for them that they could not afford not to accept."[35] Rusk believed that this was the best choice between seeking a military victory, which was beyond U.S. capabilities, and withdrawing.

Rusk's proposals became *de facto* military strategy, although deep misgivings remained, especially regarding the primacy of political negotiations. The JCS emphasized, in various memoranda, that the object of fighting was to delay a general war while continuing resistance as long as possible in order to make Chinese operations more costly.[36] Similarly, Marshall told Acheson that the strategic aim was to force the Chinese to take such losses that they would decide to stop fighting.[37] Lastly, Marshall and Truman agreed that causing attrition to the PRC was an important component in how the war would be fought.[38]

On 29 December 1950, the JCS gave MacArthur instructions, deriving from Rusk's proposals, on U.S. strategy in Korea. They told MacArthur that Korea was not the place for a major war and that the United States was not capable of winning a decisive victory. Instead, repelling the Communist attack was the major U.S. national interest. They instructed: "You are now directed to defend in successive positions, . . . inflicting such damage to hostile forces in Korea as is possible, subject to the primary

33. Director Edmund Clubb to Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk, 7 December 1950, ibid., 1444.

34. Dean Rusk, Memorandum entitled "Courses of Action in Korea," 21 December 1950, ibid., 1588.

35. Memorandum of Conversation, 27 December 1950, ibid., 1600.

36. JCS to George Marshall, 12 January 1951, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951,* vol. 7, part 1, *United States Policy in the Korean Conflict* (Washington: GPO, 1977), 71. Cited hereafter as *FRUS 1951*.

37. Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between Secretary of Defense George Marshall and Secretary of State Dean Acheson, 10 January 1950, ibid., p. 57.

38. Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between President Harry Truman and Marshall, 11 January 1951, ibid., 41.

consideration of the safety of your troops."[39] In another JCS message on 12 January 1951, Truman personally instructed MacArthur to attain these basic objects, especially avoiding a general war.[40]

While Rusk's strategy involved attrition, it was not a comprehensive operational strategy for fighting in Korea. The idea of attrition needed to be fully defined and implemented on the battlefield. Furthermore, the relationship between negotiations and military action needed to be solidified.

Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway took command of the Eighth Army on 26 December 1950, after the death of its commander, Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker. Ridgway faced the daunting task of institutionalizing limited war upon an army that was trained only to annihilate an opponent. He stated after the war: "I don't think at that time American doctrine . . . contemplated limited war. The concept had always been all-out war, where everything is used in order to achieve victory."[41] Ridgway understood that Truman and the JCS categorically did not want to risk a third world war. Personally, Ridgway embraced limited war. It was his opinion that, because of nuclear weapons, every war would now be limited, with much greater focus on political aims and civil-military relations.[42]

From the outset, Ridgway called for attrition. He believed that any alternative, particularly MacArthur's operational strategy, was too risky in terms of casualties and the threat of widening the war. Attrition provided a basic process for injuring the Communists without incurring unsustainable losses. At a corps commanders' conference on 8 February 1951, Ridgway stated that the one great object was the destruction of Communist forces and the conservation of UNC forces. He wrote in a set of operational guidelines: "My objective is just killing the enemy rather than securing territory."[43] Capturing terrain for its own sake was immaterial.[44] Holding terrain would merely magnify casualties by fixing the location of UNC forces for a Communist counterattack. The hallmark of Ridgway's idea of attrition was maximizing enemy casualties while minimizing those of the Eighth Army.[45] No actions that would incur heavy

39. JCS to General Douglas MacArthur, 29 December 1950, *FRUS 1950,* 1625.

40. JCS to MacArthur, 12 January 1951, *FRUS 1951,* 71, 77.

41. Maurice Matloff, Matthew Ridgway Oral History, 19 April 1984, 14–17, United States Army Military History Institute (USAMHI), Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

42. Ridgway to General Lawton Collins, 29 December 1950, Box 20, Matthew Ridgway Papers, USAMHI.

43. Allan Millett, ed., *The Korean War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 2:434.

44. Minutes of Conference with Corps Commanders, 8 February 1951, Edward Almond Papers, USAMHI.

45. Daily Historical Report, 3 January 1951, Box 22, Ridgway Papers.

casualties, such as frontal assaults, reckless advances, or last-ditch defensives, were to be taken.

Upon assuming command of the Eighth Army, Ridgway was quickly forced to develop methods to effect attrition. At a conference with his staff and the corps commanders on 5 January, Ridgway outlined a set of defensive measures. Expecting another Communist offensive, Ridgway, rather than fighting in forward positions, planned to withdraw behind the Han River, abandoning the South Korean capital, Seoul.[46] There was to be no sacrifice or abandonment of troops.[47] No positions were to be held at all costs unless a corps commander personally saw the situation and gave the order.[48] In his withdrawal, Ridgway wanted the maximum delay and casualties inflicted upon the Communists. Ridgway wrote in his memoirs:

> I had known that if the Chinese came in strength we could not hold for long. Our job, therefore, was to fight a stubborn delaying action—to kill as many of them as we could, and then under pressure to break off action quickly, and fall back swiftly across the Han to a new defensive line that had already been prepared, fifteen miles to the rear.[49]

Tactical opportunities for counteroffensives were to be exploited: "Seek occasions where enemy may be drawn into a trap where strong forces on flanks may counterattack and cut him up."[50] Extending Communist supply lines through withdrawing was also a component of attrition.[51] Lengthy enemy supply lines gave the U.S. Air Force and Navy a vulnerable and lucrative target for air strikes. Ridgway formalized attrition on the defensive in an operational directive to his corps commanders on 11 January.[52]

The Eighth Army fended off the Communist attack south of Seoul (the Third Phase Offensive, 1–15 January) but failed to inflict serious losses and themselves suffered substantial casualties fighting over unimportant terrain. Ridgway was irate. On 20 January, Ridgway emphatically wrote to Major General John B. Coulter, commanding the IX U.S.

46. Colonel Blair, Ridgway Oral History, Interview 4, undated, p. 64, USAMHI.

47. Ridgway to MacArthur, 5 January 1951, Box 20, Ridgway Papers.

48. Ridgway Conversation with Colonel Bullock and Colonel Clarke (G-3 EUSAK), 21 February 1951, Box 20, Ridgway Papers.

49. *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1956), 211.

50. Memorandum of Conference with Eighth US Army Korea (EUSAK) Staff and Corps Commanders, 5 January 1951, Box 20, Ridgway Papers.

51. Matthew Ridgway, Memorandum, February 1951, Chief of Staff, Eighth Army Correspondence, RG 500, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, D.C.

52. EUSAK Conference, 11 January 1951, Box 20, Ridgway Papers.

Corps, that not a single battalion or company was to be destroyed in further fighting.[53] He was particularly displeased with the 2nd U.S. Division's commander for taking 1,921 casualties, compared to an estimated 1,980 Communist, in futile counterattacks.[54] Through delaying actions and counterattacks, Ridgway believed that an Eighth Army withdrawal could have greatly injured the Communists.[55]

Having defeated the Communist Third Phase Offensive, Ridgway began outlining the offensive use of attrition. Ridgway described his offensive plans to MacArthur in early February. A rapid advance to the Thirty-eighth Parallel would result in heavy losses to the Eighth Army. Instead, the I and IX U.S. Corps would conduct a coordinated and phased advance to determine enemy strength, wear down his forces, and enable exploitation to the Han River, where the Eighth Army would hold. Advancing beyond the Han did not offer gains commensurate with the risk of over-extension. Additionally, Ridgway planned a coordinated advance by the X U.S. Corps and two South Korean corps in the east. All attacks were contingent upon enemy resistance appearing weak enough for positions to be taken without undue losses. MacArthur presented Ridgway's plans to the press as follows:

> Our strategic plan involving constant movement to keep the enemy off balance with a corresponding limitation upon his initiative remains unaltered. Our selection of the battle area, furthermore, has forced him [the Communists] into the military disadvantage of fighting far from his base, and permitted greater employment of our air and sea arms against which he has little defense. There has been a resultant continuing and exhausting attrition upon his manpower and supply.[56]

These two attacks (Operations Thunderbolt and Roundup) were the prototypes for the limited objective attack, a carefully phased offensive meant to incur the minimum losses to the Eighth Army but inflict heavy casualties on the Communists.[57]

In February 1951, Ridgway fully defined the limited objective attack, which became his foremost offensive method for attrition. Limited objective attacks sought to kill enemy forces, not capture ground.[58] Terrain was important only as it related to the tactical strength of Eighth Army positions. Ridgway wanted to seize dominating ridges in order to bolster the Eighth Army's defensive strength and to multiply the number

53. Ridgway to Major General John Coulter, 20 January 1951, Box 20, Ridgway Papers.
54. Memorandum on 2nd U.S. Division Casualties, 25 March 1951, Box 17, ibid.
55. EUSAK Conference with Corps Commanders, 8 January 1951, Box 20, ibid.
56. Text of MacArthur Speech to Press, February 1951, Box 17, ibid.
57. Ridgway to MacArthur, 3 February 1951, Box 20, ibid.
58. Ridgway Conversation with MacArthur, 13 February 1951, Box 20, ibid.

of casualties inflicted on the Communists.[59] Cities would be recaptured as a byproduct of destroying enemy armies. Local numerical and materiel superiority was a prerequisite for any limited objective attack. Tactically, superior forces would outflank, encircle, and then destroy the enemy. Methodical and mass use of firepower would soften enemy positions and reduce UNC personnel losses.[60] Pursuits needed to be cautious and careful, not reckless and chaotic. Unconstrained exploitation would overextend supply lines. Ridgway told MacArthur that logistics were a major factor in his plans: "My logistics capabilities have been the controlling factor in my operations and all advances planned . . . would be made only when ability to support them was clear beyond any reasonable doubt."[61]

Ridgway carefully avoided exposing his forces to heavy casualties. Limited objective attacks were not to be made in risky or potentially costly circumstances.[62] Ridgway tried to strike a balance between cautiously conserving casualties and mounting bold attacks to inflict losses on the Communists.[63] Tactically, Ridgway told his corps commanders not to attack any positions that could resist strongly.[64] Pitched and costly tactical actions were to be avoided when gains did not compensate for losses.[65]

Ridgway implemented a series of successful limited objective attacks (Operations Killer, Ripper, and Rugged) from February to April. The Eighth Army recaptured Seoul and advanced beyond the Thirty-eighth Parallel to the Kansas Line, which ran along the Imjin River in the west to Taepo-ri on the east coast.[66] The Communists contributed to the success of attrition through their abortive Fourth Phase Offensive, which exposed their forces to UNC firepower around Wonju and Chipyong-ni. The GHQ UNC Command Report for February 1951 read: "His forces depleted by the abnormal attrition effected by UN firepower, bitter weather, and disease, the enemy was in no position to sustain any major attacks along his front."[67] Ridgway wrote in *The Korean War:*

> The Eighth Army spent a good deal of blood in fighting its way back to and across the Han, and in reinvesting the capital of Seoul. . . . But

59. Historical Record, 4 February 1951, Box 22, ibid.

60. Lieutenant General Edward Almond, Conference on UN Military Operations in Korea, 29 June 1950–31 December 1951, undated, Almond Papers.

61. Ridgway to MacArthur, 22 March 1951, Box 20, Ridgway Papers.

62. Ridgway Conversation with MacArthur, 13 February 1951, Box 20, ibid.

63. Ridgway to Corps Commanders, 27 March 1951, Almond Papers.

64. Ridgway meeting with MacArthur, 8 March 1951, Box 20, Ridgway Papers.

65. Ridgway, Wire Transfer, 23 February 1951, ibid.

66. Matthew Ridgway, Memorandum of Conversation with MacArthur, 3 April 1951, Box 20, ibid.

67. GHQ UNC Command Report, February 1951, 270: 66/22/01, RG 407, NARA.

> it spent far less than it might have, had we not stuck to our precepts of inflicting maximum casualties at minimum cost and of avoiding all reckless, unphased advances that might lead to entrapment by a numerically superior foe. Actually some of the actions were remarkable for their low casualty figure. One or two advances, in battalion strength or better, were made with no casualties at all, thanks to good planning, well-timed execution, close cooperation among units, and above all to old-fashioned coordination of infantry, artillery, and air power.[68]

MacArthur reported in early March to the JCS that there had been "continuing and exhausting attrition upon both his [Communist] manpower and supplies."[69]

In mid-January 1951, Truman had sent General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff, and General J. Lawton Collins, U.S. Army Chief of Staff, to Korea to determine the status of Eighth Army morale. Their report of Ridgway's success quelled misgivings in the U.S. government about the effectiveness of attrition and limited war.[70] Consequently, Ridgway's operational strategy was quickly endorsed in Washington. A National Intelligence Estimate considered Korea an optimal position to wage a war of attrition against the Communists. The geography of the peninsula would confine the fighting to a set area while tying down large numbers of Chinese troops. Superior naval and air power would reduce losses from the constant exposure of UNC forces to combat.[71] Rusk wrote on 11 February, subsuming Ridgway's ideas, that until a cease-fire occurred: "U.N. forces [should] concentrate upon inflicting maximum punishment upon the enemy with minimum loss to ourselves."[72]

The final component in the development of attrition was assigning cease-fire negotiations as the explicit operational objective. In early February, Ridgway implied that the role of the Eighth Army was largely to support American diplomacy. Indeed, he sought the initiation of cease-fire negotiations by May.[73] Ridgway's action preceded any decision in Washington to actively seek negotiations. In spite of the Truman-Attlee communiqué, the U.S. government had not yet confirmed how and when

68. Ridgway, *Korean War,* 111.

69. UNC Report to the JCS, 1–15 March 1951, undated, Records of the JCS, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA), London, United Kingdom.

70. Secretary of State Meeting, 19 January 1951, *FRUS 1951,* 102.

71. National Intelligence Estimate, "International Implications of Maintaining a Beachhead in South Korea", 11 January 1951, ibid., 57.

72. Dean Rusk, "Outline of Action Regarding Korea", 11 February 1951, in ibid., 167.

73. Minutes of Conference with Corps Commanders, 8 February 1951, Almond Papers.

negotiations would begin. On 13 February, a State Department–JCS meeting discussed the long-term objectives of the war. Rusk reiterated that the objective should be to punish the enemy severely until they agreed to a cease-fire and then to reestablish the *status quo ante.* The participants, including Bradley, Admiral Forrest P. Sherman (Chief of Naval Operations), Vandenberg, Collins, and Paul H. Nitze (head of the State Department Policy Planning Staff) agreed.[74] Attention was now focused upon using attrition to compel cease-fire negotiations. However, the final decision to pursue negotiations on the basis of the *status quo ante* did not occur until the end of March.[75]

Thus, by the end of March 1951, Rusk's sparse idea of attrition had developed into a fully defined operational strategy. Ridgway continued to wage and tailor attrition after March. It was very effective in countering the largest Communist attack of the war, the Fifth Phase Offensive in April and May. When cease-fire negotiations began in the summer, Ridgway, who had become UNC commander in April, tailored attrition to compelling the Communists to agree to the UNC bargaining position. Attrition bore fruit in November 1951 when the Communists conceded to UNC demands on the location of a cease-fire line. Ridgway was unusual in his espousal of attrition. Other commanders, most famously MacArthur, were much more willing to countenance escalation. Neither Ridgway's predecessors nor his successors—Walton Walker, Douglas MacArthur, James A. Van Fleet, Mark W. Clark, and Maxwell D. Taylor—were as subtle in conceptualizing operational strategy, especially attrition. They did not emphasize minimizing casualties, were more willing to fight over terrain, and were less partial to limited aims.

Attrition remained the operational strategy of the UNC until the final armistice in 1953. Attrition never achieved strong domestic or military support within the United States, however. Many Americans wanted to see a decisive victory and found limited aims frustrating. Although relatively low compared to the Second World War, the casualties of the Korean War seemed unacceptable when no political gain was at hand. Accordingly, by the last months of the war, the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration was more willing to countenance escalation and accepted a more decisive operational strategy.

This case study of the conceptualization of attrition in Korea should make two points apparent. First, attrition was emphasized as a viable operational strategy because other, traditional, operational strategies could not be applied without unacceptable risk of escalation and casualties. Second, attrition's implementation would still not have been possi-

74. Memorandum for the Record of a Department of State–Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting, 13 February 1951, *FRUS 1951,* 174–77.

75. JCS to Marshall, 27 March 1951, ibid., 285.

ble, though, without Rusk and Ridgway. They proposed and advocated attrition. The latter, in particular, demonstrated that attrition was feasible and sustainable to wary decision makers in Washington. It is difficult to imagine the implementation of attrition over the crucial months of early 1951 without his presence.

## Attrition and the Vietnam War

The U.S. armed forces did not institutionalize attrition after the Korean War. The length and steady casualties of the war caused the Eisenhower Administration and most of the military to disdain further limited wars along with conventional operational strategies for waging them.[76] Even the U.S. Army, which still recognized the likelihood of further limited wars, did not institutionalize attrition.[77] In the late 1950s, the army focused on combining conventional operations with the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Then, in the early 1960s, developing special forces and preparing for counterinsurgency operations became a priority.[78] Thus, when the United States began deploying substantial forces to Vietnam in 1965, attrition had been not been practiced in its armed forces since Korea.

In the Vietnam War, the Viet Cong (South Vietnamese insurgents) and North Vietnamese fought a largely guerrilla war to overthrow the government of South Vietnam. The United States was committed to securing South Vietnam as an independent and non-Communist state. In late 1964 and early 1965 the Lyndon B. Johnson administration formulated the strategic aims of the United States in Vietnam: essentially to compel North Vietnam to agree to the existence of South Vietnam. The United States would employ military pressure to achieve this while defending the integrity of South Vietnam. Over the course of the first six months of 1965, the U.S. armed forces became fully involved in the war. Concurrently, an operational strategy was developed for their employment.[79]

The United States faced three major constraints in developing an operational strategy for the Vietnam War: the risk of escalation, guerrilla warfare, and the weak military condition of South Vietnam. Together, these constraints created a situation that favored the adoption of attrition.

76. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 165.

77. David Fautua, "The 'Long Pull' Army: NSC 68, the Korean War, and the Creation of the Cold War U.S. Army," *Journal of Military History* 61 (January 1997): 118.

78. Andrew Bacevich, *The Pentomic Era: The U.S. Army Between Korea and Vietnam* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1986), 16, 53, 60–69.

79. Logevall, *Choosing War,* 269.

As in Korea, the risk of escalation restricted the range of operational strategies available to the United States. U.S. decision makers did not want the conflict to escalate into a wider war with the Soviet Union or the PRC. An operational strategy that sought the total annihilation of the enemy armed forces, such as one involving the invasion of North Vietnam, could not be countenanced. The Chinese would surely intervene in reaction. A CIA briefing paper in June 1965 noted that the intelligence community had long agreed that the PRC would probably commit substantial forces if the United States invaded North Vietnam.[80] Even actions short of invading North Vietnam were viewed with hesitation. The Johnson administration was intensely concerned that air strikes against North Vietnam might precipitate Chinese intervention.[81] The Central Intelligence Agency reported that a danger existed of extreme Communist military reaction if "vital parts" of North Vietnam were damaged in the air campaign.[82] Additionally, members of the administration debated whether merely fighting in South Vietnam would cause the Chinese to intervene or, worse, prompt the Soviet Union to attack West Berlin in retaliation.[83]

The Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese were fighting a guerrilla war. They conducted numerous ambushes and raids while avoiding major battles, unless on their own terms. Additionally, conventional attacks against vulnerable South Vietnamese targets were interspersed with the guerrilla tactics. Guerrilla warfare constrained U.S. operational options. An operational strategy that emphasized decision, such as maneuver warfare, depended upon engaging the enemy. If the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese could be expected to avoid major battles and disperse their forces throughout the countryside, then they would probably not be defeated swiftly through a single decisive battle or campaign. Rather, a long process of locating and neutralizing elusive guerrillas would be likely.

The military condition of South Vietnam was deteriorating rapidly by early 1965. Viet Cong and NVA (North Vietnamese Army) numbers

80. Letter from Director of Central Intelligence W. Raborn to President Lyndon Johnson, 12 June 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States,* vol. 4, *Vietnam, 1964–1966,* 4 vols. (Washington: GPO, 1992–98), 769. Cited hereafter as *FRUS Vietnam.*

81. Westmoreland to Admiral Ulysses Grant Sharp, 11 June 1965, Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV, U.S. Army Center for Military History (CMH), Washington, D.C.

82. Memorandum from Director of Central Intelligence John McCone to President Johnson, 13 March 1965, *FRUS Vietnam,* 2:437.

83. Minutes of Meeting of President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, General Earle Wheeler, and Paul Nitze, 22 July 1965, ibid., 3:209–17.

were increasing dramatically. The Viet Cong were successfully mounting regiment-sized attacks against South Vietnamese units and strongpoints. The United States needed to adopt an operational strategy that would repulse these conventional attacks as soon as possible.

The United States tested a series of operational strategies before finally introducing attrition. First, in the early 1960s, the United States deployed military advisors to South Vietnam and attempted to implement counterinsurgency operations, a nonconventional means for fighting guerrillas with the primary goal of defeating political subversion.[84] In terms of military operations, counterinsurgency forces tried to secure population centers and important economic regions, thereby compelling the guerrillas to fight for their political base or retreat into the jungle and lose influence over the population.[85] Factors such as the rising intensity of Viet Cong operations, the political instability of South Vietnamese governments, and the ineffectiveness of the South Vietnamese armed forces undermined counterinsurgency operations. Moreover, carried out by small patrols and local militias, counterinsurgency alone could not deal with concentrated Viet Cong attacks.

Second, as combat intensified in late 1964 and early 1965, the United States launched a series of punitive air strikes. Important decision makers, such as Ambassador Maxwell Taylor and Admiral Ulysses Grant Sharp (Commander of the Pacific Command), believed that the use of air power could avert the commitment of substantial U.S. ground forces.[86] On 28 February 1965, a strategic bombing campaign against North Vietnam, known as Rolling Thunder, replaced punitive strikes. The foremost goal of Rolling Thunder was to compel the North Vietnamese to agree to a negotiated settlement on terms favorable to the United States and South Vietnam.[87] Strikes were executed in a selective and graduated manner in order to minimize the risk of escalation. Concurrently, Rolling Thunder interdicted the flow of men and equipment into South Vietnam from North Vietnam. Bombing remained a critical component of U.S. strategy until the war's conclusion. Unfortunately, it was too graduated to halt the Viet Cong gains in 1965.

Third, Ambassador Taylor's "enclave strategy" was instituted. Under this strategy, U.S. ground forces would protect the populated areas of South Vietnam, striking from these "enclaves" when necessary for self-defense. Meanwhile, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units would be free to fight in the field. The first major contingent of U.S.

84. Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1986), 56.

85. Ibid., 48–57.

86. Logevall, *Choosing War,* 260; Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam,* 138.

87. *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of US Decisionmaking on Vietnam,* Senator Gravel Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 3:277.

ground troops, Marines, landed at Danang on 9 March 1965. Their initial role was simple base security, protecting Danang and its airbase from Viet Cong attacks. A National Security Council directive, NSAM 328, issued in April, permitted U.S. ground forces to react to enemy activity and conduct counterinsurgency operations in the vicinity of the enclaves.[88]

None of these three operational strategies stabilized the military situation in South Vietnam. By June, the Viet Cong enjoyed increasingly dramatic successes. They routinely overran South Vietnamese positions. The ARVN was losing one battalion per week, and its general reserve shrunk to three effective battalions. Viet Cong activity in War Zones C and D threatened Saigon. General William C. Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, particularly worried about NVA infiltration into the Central Highlands, where he feared the enemy would cut South Vietnam in two.[89] Given this situation, Westmoreland asked Sharp and the JCS for permission to engage in active offensive operations, seizing the initiative rather than awaiting opportunities to counterattack. His preferred operational strategy was attrition.[90]

Many of the key American decision makers in 1965 had learned about attrition during the Korean War. Dean Rusk was now Secretary of State. Maxwell Taylor had commanded the Eighth Army in Korea in 1953 and was now Ambassador to Vietnam. Westmoreland, the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, had led the prestigious 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team in 1951. Ironically, the strategy of attrition these men would help formulate and implement in Vietnam would be markedly different from that employed in Korea.

Westmoreland had preferred employing attrition since early 1965, when the Battle of Binh Gia had convinced him South Vietnam verged on collapse.[91] The VC and North Vietnamese conventional attacks made counterinsurgency and the enclave strategy too passive.[92] And Rolling Thunder was too graduated to coerce the North Vietnamese in the near

88. Wheeler to Sharp, 20 March 1965, Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV; Wheeler to Westmoreland, 3 April 1965, Westmoreland Correspondence, CMH.

89. William Westmoreland, *Report on Operations in South Vietnam, January 1964–June 1968* (Washington: GPO, 1968), 98; Westmoreland to Sharp, 13 June 1965, Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV, CMH.

90. Westmoreland to Sharp, 13 June 1965, Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV, CMH. This was Westmoreland's second message of the day to Sharp.

91. Westmoreland, *Report on Operations in South Vietnam,* 97.

92. Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: Brookings Institute, 1979), 120–23. Westmoreland to Sharp, 15 March 1965, Westmoreland Correspondence, CMH.

future.[93] Conventional ground attacks demanded a conventional ground response.[94] The JCS supported Westmoreland. Since March, they had believed direct military action was imperative to avoid defeat.[95] But Westmoreland also understood that the enemy's tendency to avoid large battles on disadvantageous terms and the impossibility of taking the ground war to North Vietnam precluded a decisive victory. Enemy formations would have to be sought out and destroyed one by one.[96] Westmoreland believed that this would entail a protracted war of attrition.[97]

At this point, Westmoreland's idea of attrition was vague and undefined. Other than sustaining an intense operational tempo against major units and formations, he had assigned no methods to the basic idea of wearing down the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. As Viet Cong pressure mounted in March 1965, the U.S. headquarters, Military Advisory Command Vietnam (MACV), began a detailed study of the situation and developed courses of action. These centered on holding key areas and thwarting the North Vietnamese in the Central Highlands.[98] After the Viet Cong won a string of victories in May, Westmoreland requested the deployment of forty-four U.S. and allied battalions to South Vietnam.[99]

On 13 June, Westmoreland sent his immediate superior, Admiral Sharp, a memorandum on his prospective concept of operations. U.S. ground forces would be directed against well-organized and equipped enemy formations rather than local guerrilla units. He wrote:

> the MACV concept is basically to employ US forces together with Vietnamese airborne and marine battalions of the General Reserve against the hard core DRV/VC [North Vietnamese/VC] forces in reaction and search and destroy operations, and thus permit the concentration of Vietnamese troops in heavily populated areas along the coast, around Saigon and in the Delta.[100]

U.S. ground operations would form a shield under which the ARVN could conduct counterinsurgency. The main contribution of U.S. forces would

93. William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1976), 119.

94. Sharp to Wheeler, 6 March 1965, Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV, CMH.

95. Memorandum from the JCS to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, 20 March 1965, *FRUS Vietnam,* 2:466; Wheeler to Sharp, 20 March 1965, Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV, CMH.

96. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports,* 153.

97. William Westmoreland, "A Military War of Attrition," in *The Lessons of Vietnam,* ed. Ed Scott Thompson and Donaldson Frizzell (New York: Crane, Russak & Company, 1977), 60.

98. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports,* 128.

99. Westmoreland to Sharp, *FRUS Vietnam,* 2:772–74.

100. General William Westmoreland to Admiral Ulysses Grant Sharp, Memorandum on Concept of Operations, 13 June 1965, *Pentagon Papers,* 4:606.

be in "taking the fight to the enemy" through counterattacking the Viet Cong and invading their base areas.[101] In a later interview with Andrew Krepinevich, Westmoreland stated that he had planned: "to achieve a well-balanced, hard-hitting force designed to fight in sustained combat and just grind away against the enemy on a sustained basis."[102]

A message to General Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on 24 June demonstrated the centrality of attrition in Westmoreland's thoughts. He wrote: "the premise behind whatever further actions we may undertake, either in SVN or DRV [South Vietnam or North Vietnam], must be that we are in for the long pull. The struggle has become a war of attrition. I see no likelihood of achieving a quick, favorable end to the war."[103]

Westmoreland stressed to Sharp and Wheeler that attrition was the only possible operational strategy. He wrote to Sharp on 11 June: "I see no practical alternative, short of nuclear war, to continue as we are, preparing for the long haul by building up our forces and facilities with [the] objective of gaining a qualitative and quantitative margin over [the] enemy which will *wear him down*" [italics added].[104] Similarly, he wrote to Wheeler on 26 June: "It seems every several months we spin our wheels exploring novel ideas on how to deal with this conflict. We are deluding ourselves if we feel some novel arrangement is going to get quick results. We must think in terms of an *extended conflict;* be prepared to support a greatly increased effort" [italics added].[105]

Westmoreland gave a more detailed version of his proposed operational strategy to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, and Wheeler, who arrived in South Vietnam in early July to appraise the situation for President Johnson. He envisioned that attrition would persist over three phases. First, U.S. and allied forces would secure South Vietnam's military position and halt Viet Cong and North Vietnamese attacks. Second, U.S. and allied forces would seize the initiative and wear down Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces in high-priority areas. Third, the destruction of all Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces would be pursued throughout South Vietnam.[106] McNamara and Wheeler supported Westmoreland's plans. Reporting to

101. Westmoreland to Wheeler, 26 June 1965, Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV, CMH.

102. Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam,* 165.

103. Westmoreland to Wheeler, 24 June 1965, *FRUS Vietnam,* 3:42.

104.Westmoreland to Sharp, 11 June 1965, Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV, CMH.

105. Westmoreland to Wheeler, 26 June 1965, ibid.

106. Weigley, *American Way of War,* 465; Westmoreland, *Report on Operations in South Vietnam,* 100.

Johnson, McNamara described how Westmoreland intended to wear down Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces:

> The SV, US, and third-country forces, by aggressive exploitation of superior military forces, are to gain and hold the initiative—keeping the enemy at a disadvantage, maintaining a tempo such as to deny them time to recuperate or regain their balance, and pressing the fight against the VC/DRV main force units in South Vietnam to run them to the ground and destroy them. The operations should compel the VC/DRV to fight at a higher and more sustained intensity with resulting higher logistical consumption and . . . to limit his capacity to resupply forces in combat at that scale by attacking his lines of communications.[107]

Thereby, the North Vietnamese would supposedly be compelled to come to terms favorable to South Vietnam and the United States.[108] McNamara wrote: "Our object in Vietnam is to create conditions for a favorable outcome by demonstrating to the VC/DRV that the odds are against their winning. We want to create these conditions, if possible, without causing the war to expand into one with China or the Soviet Union."[109]

As previous quotes have illustrated, Westmoreland sought a "qualitative and quantitative superiority" that would allow an intense operational tempo. This superiority would primarily be in material resources. Westmoreland understood that Washington would not approve the reinforcements necessary to outnumber the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese in manpower. On 30 July 1965, Johnson authorized the deployment of forty-four battalions (including thirty-four American) to South Vietnam, meeting Westmoreland's request for more ground forces. Simultaneously, the Johnson administration permitted Westmoreland to begin offensive operations. Westmoreland now had the latitude to implement his operational strategy of attrition.[110]

Many military officers did not share Westmoreland's belief that attrition was the only possible operational strategy. For example, Sharp preferred to focus on air strikes and intensifying Rolling Thunder. He believed the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese would outlast the United States in a war of attrition. Vietnamese history, doctrine, and experience demonstrated a tolerance of casualties unacceptable to most countries. From Sharp's perspective, the best strategy was to rely on an intensified air campaign.[111] Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force, did not favor attrition. He focused on counterinsurgency in the Marine area of operations near the North Viet-

107. *Pentagon Papers,* 4:298.
108. Ibid., p. 296; McNamara to Johnson, 1 July 1965, *FRUS Vietnam,* 3:97.
109. McNamara to Johnson, 20 July 1965, ibid., 3:171.
110. Weigley, *American Way of War,* 465.
111. Sharp to JCS, 12 January 1966, *FRUS Vietnam,* 4:48.

namese border. Beginning in the latter half of 1965, he and Westmoreland fought a running battle over the employment of Marine forces in counterinsurgency versus search-and-destroy operations.

Members of the Johnson administration also opposed attrition. The Central Intelligence Agency estimated that the Viet Cong would avoid major confrontations with U.S. ground forces, which would preclude their attrition.[112] McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, called the U.S. land commitment and air campaign "rash to the point of folly."[113] U.S. troops were untrained in fighting guerrillas, and air strikes had so far been of questionable value. Undersecretary of State George W. Ball argued that the United States, in general, would be unlikely to win a guerrilla war. A long protracted war would disclose American weaknesses and have a messy conclusion.

Nevertheless, most observers, including Wheeler, McNamara, Taylor, and Sharp, recognized that the formulation of operational strategy for Vietnam was problematic and that the range of options was restricted. Without the strategic and operational constraints, many other operational strategies would have been perceived as viable, providing Westmoreland with more options.

Over the remainder of 1965, Westmoreland defined and solidified methods for wearing down the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. His operational strategy had different characteristics from Ridgway's. Most importantly, the primary method of attrition in Vietnam was search-and-destroy operations rather than in-depth withdrawals or limited objective attacks. Search-and-destroy operations sought to engage and force the enemy into battle by aggressively maneuvering through the countryside. Once found, enemy forces would be pursued, intercepted, and destroyed.[114] Westmoreland believed search-and-destroy operations to be the only means for spoiling Viet Cong conventional attacks. They would be conducted from fixed and defended bases (fire bases).[115] As in Korea, holding ground, except for these bases, was not a priority. Westmoreland wrote in *A Soldier Reports:* "Once we had accomplished our goal of bringing the enemy to battle and inflicting heavy losses . . . what point in continuing to hold the high ground?"[116] Search-and-destroy operations were usually mounted in the interior of Vietnam, away from the major towns.

112. National Security Meeting [All principal decision makers], 21 July 1965, ibid., 3:194–95.

113. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy to McNamara, 30 June 1965, ibid., 3:90.

114. Westmoreland to Lieutenant General Lewis Walt, 24 November 1965, Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV, CMH.

115. Westmoreland to Sharp, Concept of Operations, 13 June 1965, *FRUS Vietnam,* 3:3.

116. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports,* 150.

The size of search-and-destroy operations ranged from a single platoon to entire divisions. Westmoreland stressed that his combat forces needed to be mobile. Given the lack of roads in 1965, helicopters would be the key vehicle for transporting units in and out of combat.[117]

Some similarities existed between attrition in Vietnam and Korea. Most importantly, firepower was emphasized as a means of increasing enemy casualties. Firepower was one of the few elements of attrition that the U.S. Army continued to stress after the Korean War. It was regularly viewed as a substitute for manpower.[118] In Vietnam, Westmoreland wanted sufficient artillery for all U.S. formations to be able to harass the Viet Cong "round the clock."[119] Fire bases provided artillery and mortar support to the units in the field. Additionally, firepower, in the form of air strikes, was a fundamental component of attrition for Westmoreland. This included not only air support from tactical aircraft, but also devastating "Arclight" strikes from B-52 strategic bombers.

The operations of the 173rd Airborne Brigade in War Zone D in June 1965 were the blueprint for Westmoreland's use of B-52 bombers in air support. The brigade advanced in coordination with B-52 strikes (Operation Arclight I) on the area of operations.[120] Westmoreland considered the results impressive.[121] Thereafter, he viewed B-52 strikes as a routine and valuable adjunct to his in-country air capability. Infantry battalions would attack in the wake of the B-52 strikes, exploiting the damage and confusion to inflict additional losses on the Viet Cong and their supplies and facilities. Westmoreland told Wheeler that he wanted eight hundred B-52 sorties per month.[122]

Several major operations confirmed the viability of attrition for Westmoreland and MACV. Throughout the summer and fall, the Marines and the 173rd Airborne Brigade engaged in a series of search-and-destroy operations.[123] Operations culminated with the assault of the 1st U.S. Cavalry Division into the Ia Drang Valley, within the Central Highlands. In October and November, the division fought a bloody campaign against an NVA division, eventually securing the valley. It was the first large-scale use of helicopters to transport troops into battle. Westmoreland told General Creighton W. Abrams, the U.S. Army Vice Chief of

117. CMH: Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV, Westmoreland to Wheeler, 26 June 1965.

118. Bacevich, *Pentomic Era,* 55–56.

119. Westmoreland to Wheeler, 26 June 1965, Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV, CMH.

120. Westmoreland to Sharp, 20 June 1965, ibid.

121. Westmoreland, *Report on Operations in South Vietnam,* 98.

122. Westmoreland to Sharp, 20 June 1965, Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV, CMH.

123. Westmoreland to Sharp, 4 October 1965, ibid.

Staff, in Washington that the battle proved the effectiveness of airmobile tactics.[124] Lieutenant General Harold G. Moore, who as a lieutenant colonel had commanded a battalion in the battle, wrote in *We Were Soldiers Once . . . And Young* that the estimated kill ratio (twelve North Vietnamese per American) confirmed the effectiveness of attrition for Westmoreland and his assistant Major General William E. DuPuy. Moore wrote: "What that said to two officers who had learned their trade in the meat-grinder campaigns in World War II was that they could bleed the enemy to death over the long haul, with a strategy of attrition."[125]

These operations also illustrate that, unlike Ridgway, Westmoreland did not emphasize minimizing casualties as a characteristic of attrition. The Battle for the Ia Drang Valley had severely taxed American forces. For example, two battalions of the 1st U.S. Cavalry Division had a casualty rate of nearly 50 percent.[126] In general, search-and-destroy operations drained U.S. infantry strength. By November 1965, Westmoreland wrote to General Waters in Hawaii that all infantry units had suffered significant casualties. Furthermore, he expected casualties to grow substantially as the operational tempo increased.[127] Westmoreland accepted that an intense operational tempo would temporarily cause higher casualties but believed that, in the end, casualties would be reduced because aggressive tactics would destroy enemy formations faster than cautious tactics, thus shortening the war.[128] However, even though he accepted the casualties entailed in an intense operational tempo, Westmoreland did not predicate attrition upon trading American lives for Vietnamese lives. He did not believe that U.S. and South Vietnamese forces would have to endure heavier losses than the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese in order for attrition to be successful.

Westmoreland formally presented his completed operational strategy to Johnson at the Honolulu Conference of February 1966.[129] The conference essentially validated attrition as the U.S. operational strategy for Vietnam. Westmoreland reiterated the major characteristics of his operational strategy. He stressed that search-and-destroy operations would "attrit" major VC and NVA formations.[130] And the war would be

124. Westmoreland to General Creighton Abrams, 21 November 1965, ibid.

125. Harold Moore and Joseph Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once . . . And Young* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 399.

126. Michael Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Reference to Casualties and Other Figures, 1618–1991* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland Press, 1992), 1233–36.

127. Westmoreland to General Waters, 16 November 1965, Westmoreland Message File COMUSMACV, CMH.

128. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports,* 152.

129. Ibid., 159–60.

130. *Pentagon Papers,* 4:315.

long. The enemy would not be defeated in a single battle. Rather, he would "have to be ferreted out over a period of time, which will involve many campaigns."[131]

Attrition was fully implemented over 1966. A set of large-scale search-and-destroy missions, such as Operations Masher and Hastings, marked the new year. The ground war intensified as the North Vietnamese infiltrated over the Demilitarized Zone, which divided North and South Vietnam, and forced the Marines to engage in pitched regiment-sized battles.[132] Throughout South Vietnam, Viet Cong and NVA casualties are suspected to have been greater than those of the U.S. and South Vietnamese.[133] Attrition remained the operational strategy of U.S. ground forces in Vietnam until after the Tet Offensive in 1968. It was ultimately ineffective. Search-and-destroy operations usually failed to engage the Viet Cong or NVA, who fought only under advantageous circumstances. The NVA and Viet Cong excelled at exploiting the jungle and mountains to evade U.S. sweeps and mount ambushes of their own. As in the Korean War, popular opinion in the United States questioned a strategy that was protracted and entailed steady casualties yet pursued limited, and seemingly ambiguous, aims. Furthermore, attrition ignored the domestic political situation in South Vietnam. It did not counter successive corrupt and inefficient South Vietnamese governments, whose actions undermined popular support for the anti-Communist cause. By antagonizing the population, they enabled Communist political development within South Vietnam. Moreover, in spite of substantial casualties, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were never willing to abandon their ultimate goal of controlling South Vietnam. Unlike in Korea, attrition in Vietnam failed to compel the enemy to negotiate seriously over terms acceptable to the United States, at least until late in the war.

This case study of the implementation of attrition in the Vietnam War makes three points. First, strategic and operational constraints encouraged attrition. The risk of escalation, guerrilla warfare, and the increasing success of enemy attacks inhibited other operational strategies. Second, Westmoreland's preference for conventional ground operations, combined with constraints, led to the implementation of attrition. The ideas of Westmoreland, as commander of MACV, were critical to attrition in Vietnam. Other commanders, such as Taylor or Sharp, would have preferred a different operational strategy, such as strategic bombing or counterinsurgency. Accordingly, a different operational strategy

131. Press Conference, Honolulu, 5 February 1966, Westmoreland Papers, CMH.

132. Michael Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965–1972* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), 110.

133. R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History: From 3500 B.C. to the Present,* 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 1221.

probably would have been chosen if Westmoreland had not commanded MACV. Third, continuity between attrition in Korea and Vietnam was not significant. Attrition in Vietnam was not developed directly from the U.S. experience in the Korean War. The combination of search-and-destroy missions and firepower, despite some similarities to Korea, was developed by Westmoreland and his staff specifically for fighting in Vietnam.

## Conclusion

*Historical Accuracy of Popular Image of Attrition*

Historical evidence from the Korean and Vietnam Wars contradicts several assertions of the popular image of attrition. First, attrition was not designed to involve bloody slogging matches. Neither in Korea nor Vietnam did attrition entail trading casualties with the enemy in order to eventually cause his military collapse. Ridgway minimized, rather than accepted, casualties as a fundamental component of attrition. In his view, attrition would avoid reckless actions that might multiply casualties. Westmoreland, although less cautious than Ridgway, also did not base attrition on suffering heavier losses than his opponents.

Next, numerical superiority was not a defining characteristic of attrition in Korea or Vietnam. In Korea, U.S. decision makers favored attrition because of the UNC's marked numerical inferiority to the Communists. Westmoreland also did not build his strategy of attrition around numerical superiority. However, material superiority, as the popular image assumes, characterized attrition in both Korea and Vietnam. Ridgway and Westmoreland used air strikes and artillery lavishly to multiply enemy casualties.

Nevertheless, the use of firepower did not perfectly match the expectations of the popular image of attrition. Attrition was not a factory-like process. Westmoreland and Ridgway did not treat their opponents as an array of targets to be destroyed in routinized artillery bombardments and air strikes. Rather, they combined fire and movement. Ridgway used firepower alongside in-depth withdrawals and limited objective attacks. In these operations, he frequently attempted to outflank the Communists or cause them to extend their supply lines as a means of inflicting losses. Similarly, Westmoreland's use of firepower inherently depended upon movement. In Vietnam, there was no standing array of targets to be destroyed by aircraft or artillery. Westmoreland needed to use firepower in conjunction with the long-distance movement of ground forces to locate and intercept guerrillas.

Finally, the total annihilation of the enemy was the goal of attrition in neither Korea nor Vietnam. Attrition was an alternative to operational strategies that sought annihilation. Attrition in both conflicts sought lim-

ited aims: compelling the enemy to agree to the U.S. bargaining position for a cease-fire. Operational and strategic constraints precluded outright annihilation.

Thus, major characteristics of the popular image of attrition were absent in the Vietnam and Korean Wars. Furthermore, the popular image not only describes attrition inaccurately but also incorrectly assumes that continuity exists between different examples of attrition. As an operational strategy, attrition was markedly different in Korea and Vietnam. Ridgway's operational strategy was based on careful limited advances or in-depth withdrawals by concentrated formations, coordinated with heavy firepower. Westmoreland's operational strategy also involved heavy firepower but centered on dispersed formations searching out the enemy over a wide expanse of territory. It was developed specifically for the Vietnam War. The U.S. experience with attrition in Korea did not predetermine its characteristics.

*A New Definition of Attrition*

Given the lack of continuity, a common definition of attrition from the Korean and Vietnam cases must be vague and general, rather than detailed and specific. The two operational strategies shared two fundamental characteristics. First, they were based on a gradual and piecemeal process of destroying the enemy's military capability through a variety of methods: in-depth withdrawals, limited objective attacks, air strikes, artillery fire, and search-and-destroy missions. Attrition was not meant to achieve a quick decision: Ridgway and Westmoreland understood that success would not be forthcoming. A succession of repeated engagements whittled away enemy forces instead of destroying them decisively in a single battle or campaign. By comparison, other conventional strategies are not based on gradual and piecemeal destruction. For example, MacArthur's strategy in Korea sought a decision and the complete annihilation of enemy forces as quickly as possible.

Second, attrition was generally conventional, meaning it could be used to physically defend population, terrain, a city, or another vital resource. In Korea and Vietnam, attrition served to prevent enemy forces, respectively, from capturing South Korea and regions of South Vietnam, like Saigon and Danang. By contrast, unconventional strategies, such as guerrilla warfare and terrorism, avoid direct confrontation with enemy armed forces and are not optimally suited to physically preventing the enemy from capturing territory, seizing resources, or harming the population. This distinction is important because guerrilla warfare and terrorism, like attrition, involve the gradual and piecemeal destruction of the enemy's military capability. The difference between these strategies and attrition is that the latter physically defends people or resources. Additionally, these strategies have significant other com-

ponents, such as gaining political control or engaging in civic action, that were not resident in attrition.

*Factors Behind the Implementation of Attrition*

The popular image of attrition does not offer a convincing reason for its adoption by commanders, merely suggesting that overwhelming superiority and inept leadership played a role and implying that a different operational strategy, specifically maneuver warfare, should have been chosen. To the contrary, assessment of the Korean and Vietnam wars shows that commanders were constrained from adopting certain operational strategies other than attrition, including maneuver warfare. Strategic and operational constraints inhibited alternative operational strategies and thus encouraged the implementation of attrition. During the Korean War, the risk of escalation and Communist numerical superiority made other operational strategies seem unacceptable. During the Vietnam War, the risk of escalation, guerrilla warfare, and the urgent military situation successively undermined operational strategies other than attrition. In both conflicts, attrition offered an outlet for the use of force. Gradually destroying an enemy's military capability was applicable to difficult situations because it was not subject to a single formulaic approach. Thus, it could be adapted to deal with different constraints.

Although constraints restricted options, attrition was never the only operational strategy available to U.S. commanders and decision makers in Korea and Vietnam. They considered a range of options and implemented attrition only after extensive strategic debate. In Korea, numerous officers, most notably MacArthur, advocated more aggressive operations. In Vietnam, many officers and political decision makers called for greater reliance on air power or an outright invasion of North Vietnam. No one knew in advance which of these strategies would be most effective. Indeed, historians have made strong arguments that attrition was not the only strategy that could have been implemented in Vietnam, let alone the correct one.[134]

Thus, constraints alone did not cause attrition in Korea and Vietnam. The case studies show that individuals and their ideas also played a pivotal role. In particular, Ridgway and Westmoreland were willing to adapt to the constraints of their environment. Without them, attrition in Korea and Vietnam, even with the presence of strategic and operational constraints, becomes difficult to envision. Both grasped wearing down the enemy as the underlying principle for their operational strategy. In the Korean War, Rusk's idea of attrition probably would not have been

134. See Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam*; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*; and Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1995).

accepted if Ridgway had not also seized upon attrition and demonstrated its feasibility on the battlefield. Similarly, in the Vietnam War, attrition probably would not have been adopted without Westmoreland playing the primary role in conceptualizing and advocating it.

*Significance*

This article has tried to address a gap in the historiography of warfare. Through examining the Korean and Vietnam wars, it has attempted to provide a historically accurate, albeit case-specific, description of attrition. This description clashes with the popular image of the subject. Korea and Vietnam are widely acknowledged examples of it. They are also the most recent experiences of the United States with it. The fact that the popular image is not representative of attrition in Korea or Vietnam casts doubt upon its accuracy. Accordingly, attrition needs to be considered from a new perspective. Further case studies are obviously necessary before any conclusions about the general nature of attrition can be confirmed. Tentatively, attrition should be assessed as a basic process in warfare that can be characterized by a variety of methods, rather than as a highly sophisticated and set operational doctrine. The Korean and Vietnam cases strongly suggest that continuity has not marked the general history of attrition. If two cases with strong national, organizational, and strategic connections lack continuity, then the wider history of attrition probably does as well. Moreover, attrition was not merely the strategy of the foolish. As should be clear, it was a valuable operational strategy in Korea and Vietnam. Although not necessarily the optimal form of warfare, attrition was a useful alternative to other operational strategies that were too costly or risky to be applied in certain contexts.