

The Vocabulary of the Vietnam War

South African invocations of an analogy and its associated lessons

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This paper examines the use of the Vietnam analogy by protagonists involved in conflicts in the African sub-continent during the 1970s–1980s, known variously as the Apartheid Wars, the Angolan-Namibian War or the Border War. It also analyses the attendant but typically specious lessons that military and political leaders are inclined to draw from the Vietnam analogy. It suggests that politicians and military professionals do not actually learn from the past: history provides a rhetorical device rather than an analytical tool and serves a political rather than a pedagogical purpose.

In 1973, the historian Ernest R. May published *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. He advocated that foreign policy framers adopt a more considered and informed approach to what history supposedly teaches. The book propounded three theses: that foreign policymakers are often influenced by what they perceive to be the “lessons” of history; that they ordinarily use history badly; and that they could use history more accurately with help from professional historians. In order to make his argument that statesmen sometimes perceive problems in terms of analogies from the past and historical parallels that provide portends for the future, May offered case studies of the ways in which such thinking influenced American decision making in respect of World War II, the Cold War, Korea, and Vietnam. Writing before the US withdrawal from Vietnam, he adduces evidence to show that both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations drew inferences from a range of historical events. May reckons that much of the reasoning was flawed and superficial. He claims that advisers invoked analogies from previous

conflicts “with utter disregard for expertise or even the inherent logic of their assertions.” But possibly even more telling is that they had little knowledge of and ignored Vietnamese history.¹ While this was still the case with subsequent administrations, they were to become well versed in the vocabulary of the Vietnam War.

More recent research has confirmed that May was correct to insist that the citation of historical analogies is commonplace among American military and political leaders who seek to draw lessons from the past and apply these to the making of policy decisions. Indeed, the arsenal of analogies at their disposal has grown exponentially. Recurring analogies include warnings to heed the lessons gleaned from 1930s-style appeasement of warmongers, the avoidance of repeating mistakes that contributed to the “loss” of China, and so on.² But the Vietnam experience is the weapon of choice in the arsenal; it has been invoked with respect to the Gulf War, the “War on Terror,” and virtually every other military action involving the deployment of troops on the ground since the 1970s. More often than not, it is regarded as a mistake not to be repeated or as providing a predictor of an outcome to be averted.³ So for US President George H.W. Bush (snr) the lesson of Vietnam was that soldiers should not be asked to “fight with one hand behind their back” and be given all the support needed to win the war. Following the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, Bush proclaimed that the US had kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.⁴ He turned the narrative on its head. As Marilyn Young notes:

Initially the Vietnam syndrome referred to the reluctance of the public to engage in war. Now it is the government of the country that is caught

¹ Ernest R. May, *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 119–121.

² David Hoogland Noon, “Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7:3 (2004): 339–366.

³ James H. Willbanks, “The Legacy of the Vietnam War for the US Army,” – *America and the Vietnam War: Re-examining the Culture and History of a Generation*, eds. Andrew Wiest, Mary Kathryn Barbier and Glenn Robins (New York: Routledge, 2010), 271–288.

⁴ Molly Andrews, *Shaping History: Narratives of Political Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 101–103.

in its grip, convinced that the only cure for that long-ago defeat is yet more war.⁵

It is precisely because its lessons are not necessarily self-evident that the Vietnam analogy can be utilised to suit any political agenda or course of action.

May was the first but not the only proponent of the notion that the lessons that policy makers derive from historical events exert a considerable and often crucial impact upon the framing and implementation of policy. For such scholars analogies serve as frameworks or schemas that inform decision-making.⁶ However, certain scholars are sceptical of the assumption that policymakers invoke analogies to make decisions. They doubt whether it is necessary to resort to cognitive structures like historical analogies to explain the choices of policymakers. Instead, they suggest that analogies are used to explain a conclusion already reached on the basis of ideology and political positioning. In other words, an analogy provides a post-hoc justification for arriving at a decision rather than a schema shaping it.⁷ It seems safe to say that analogies may be employed before and after the fact but that “lessons” derived therefrom are obviously determined retrospectively.

This paper examines the use of the Vietnam analogy by certain protagonists involved in conflicts in the African sub-continent during the 1970s–80s, known variously as the Apartheid Wars, the Angolan-Namibian War or the Border War.⁸ I approach the task well aware that this

⁵ Marilyn Young, “Still Stuck in the Big Muddy,” – *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History after the Fall of Communism*, ed. Ellen Schrecker (New York: The New Press, 2004), 270.

⁶ David Houghton, “The Role of Analogical Reasoning in Novel Foreign-Policy Situations,” *British Journal of Political Science* 26:4 (1996): 524.

⁷ See Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 8–9; A.J. Taylor and J.T. Tourke, “Historical Analogies in the Congressional Foreign Policy Process,” *The Journal of Politics* 52:2 (1995): 460–468.

⁸ The nomenclature is a not so much a matter of dispute as one of perspective. Whereas the white electorate called the conflict in Angola-Namibia the “Border War,” or sometimes the “bush war,” those fighting against the apartheid regime preferred other terms. For SWAPO it was the War of National Liberation, otherwise known as the Namibian War of Independence. Namibia and South Africa were arguably theatres of the same conflict and liberation move-

exercise might serve to reify the Vietnam analogy. Hence I am not so much concerned with the merits of the comparisons as I am with why and to what purpose they have been appropriated. I will then examine the attendant but typically specious lessons that military and political leaders are inclined to draw from the Vietnam analogy. Rather than seek to validate May's proposition that such leaders can be better educated about the past and actually learn from it, I think we need to acknowledge that for them history serves a political rather than a pedagogical purpose. While professional historians should not countenance nor become party to such tendencies and are bound to question the uses and abuses of history,⁹ we do not own the past. As practitioners we would do well to recognise that much more is invested in memory politics than simply representing the past accurately. Public memory arguably eclipses the importance of academic history insofar as it represents a body of beliefs and ideas that enable a society to understand its past, present and future. As such, it reflects the structure and dynamics of power in society.

The symbolic power of language: analogies and metaphors

The meaning of a war is (re)produced within a linguistic field that is redolent with material and symbolic relations of power.¹⁰ Thus figures of speech such as analogies, metaphors and tropes constitute a form of knowledge about the past that has rhetorical resonance and assumes a kind of "symbolic power" that may be marshalled in much the same way as material power. Political and cultural elites have recourse to such symbols of knowledge so that they become the stock in trade of opinion

ments in the latter referred to their fight against the South African security forces as the armed and/or liberation struggle. Recently, scholars have taken to speaking of the "Apartheid Wars" or even the "Thirty Years War." See, for instance, Colin Leys and John S. Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle: The Double-Edged Sword* (London: James Currey, 1995).

⁹ Jeremy Black, *Using History* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005); Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Exmouth Books, 2008).

¹⁰ Noon, "Operation Enduring Analogy," 347.

shapers and decision makers. This is not to deny that power is contested in a world of ideological difference and finds expression in different cultural understandings of the world and one's own society.¹¹ Nor is it to deny that both within the corridors of power and the public sphere at large there may be differences of opinion over the meaning of the past (and particular events that are thought to have a bearing on the present). But negotiating these power dynamics requires the construction and/or appropriation of a narrative that becomes operative as a framework for self-understanding.¹²

Within this linguistic (mine?)field, figures of speech serve a predicative function that allows the user to relate two or more different entities by establishing a similitude of some kind between them.¹³ Thus analogies suggest that the present bears a striking resemblance to the past and generate expectations that the future, too, might do so.¹⁴ They posit a perceived likeness between two entities, whereas a metaphor communicates that likeness.

Allow me to elaborate. An analogy allows us to compare what is known about one domain, realm of experience or set of events with something similar.¹⁵ In the words of Elliott, analogies “[...] serve as a cognitive filter that transforms the unfamiliar into something recognizable and reduces complexity to manageable proportions.”¹⁶ Whereas analogies allow us to compare like things, metaphors compare unrelated things that are drawn from distinctly different realms of experience. Analogies might be useful

¹¹ Jan-Werner Muller, “Introduction: The power of memory, the memory of power and the power over memory,” – *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe*, ed. Jan-Werner Muller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 24–25.

¹² David Glassberg, “Public History and the Study of Memory,” *The Public Historian* 18:2 (1996): 1.

¹³ David Panagia, “The Predicative Function in Ideology: On the Political Uses of Analogical Reasoning in Contemporary Political Thought,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6 (2001): 57.

¹⁴ Noon, “Operation Enduring Analogy,” 342 citing Panagia, “The Predicative Function in Ideology.”

¹⁵ Keith L. Shimko, “Metaphors and Foreign Policy Decision Making,” *Political Psychology* 15:4 (1994): 658–659.

¹⁶ David Elliott, “Parallel Wars? Can ‘Lessons of Vietnam’ be applied to Iraq?” – *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam*, ed. Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young (New York: New Press, 2007), 18.

for finding historical precedents for new situations, but metaphors “provide an underlying intellectual construct for framing the situation, for viewing the world, an outlook which creates some degree of order and expectations.”¹⁷ In other words, metaphors offer a comparative frame of reference that helps understand something outside one’s previous range of experience or field of knowledge; they help to make sense of novel situations. This is especially the case when we do not have the necessary cognitive and linguistic tools to create new categories of meaning.¹⁸ A metaphor can provide a mental picture of something familiar that is referenced to make sense of something that is unfamiliar. The process involves making comparisons based on perceived resemblances (induction) and then inferring additional similarities (deduction). Metaphorical reasoning allows for the crossing of categorical boundaries so as to translate the literal world of one’s experience into an imaginary world resembling that of another. It offers a cognitive shortcut so as to make sense of complex issues.¹⁹

I have already noted that Americans have access to an arsenal of analogies in order to make or justify policy decisions. The vocabulary of the Vietnam War finds ready purchase among advisers, speechwriters, lobbyists, and so on. But the US political and military authorities also employ metaphors such as “quagmire” or “slippery slope” drawn from the experience of having become entangled in Vietnam. This illustrates the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s point that they have license to pick and choose whatever they think suits the occasion – that we can speak of a mobile army of metaphors.²⁰ Each in its own way seeks to provide common frames of reference or a good fit between one situation and another. But analogies and metaphors only facilitate the understanding a given conflict situation when one is able to relate it to pre-existing experience and knowledge. But even a lack of reliable intelligence can create an infor-

¹⁷ Shimko, “Metaphors and Foreign Policy Decision Making,” 685.

¹⁸ David N. Livingstone & Richard T. Harrison, “Meaning through Metaphor: Analogy as Epistemology,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 71:1 (1981): 96.

¹⁹ Khong, *Analogies at War*.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*. Transl. Sander L. Gilman, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 250 cited in Noon, “Operation Enduring Analogy,” 343.

mation vacuum in which the appearance of knowledge has power. Whatever the case, this requires the imaginative (re)construction of past wars even when these were waged far apart in space and time. The capacity to imagine one war as another suggests the enduring power of analogies and metaphors, and the pervasive influence of symbolic forms of knowledge.

Imagining one war as another

The Border War waged by the apartheid state sought to perpetuate the fiction that the troops of the South African Defence Force (SADF) were protecting South Africa's border and not actually fighting on foreign soil.²¹ Indeed, the phrase Border War encodes white South African understanding of the nature of the conflict in Angola/Namibia in the same way as the term Vietnam War represents an American perspective on the conflict in which they were involved in south-east Asia. In this section of the paper, I will construct a narrative that suggests that the conflicts in south-east Asia and southern Africa resembled one another, that they were partly analogous.

Following the departure of the Portuguese forces from Angola and Mozambique and the resultant collapse of part of South Africa's cordon sanitaire, southern Africa became a "hot spot" in the Cold War. The stakes were reckoned to be as high as in south-east Asia. The 27 February 1976 edition of *The Guardian* newspaper commented that: "If the watershed of history was Vietnam, the fatal blow to imperialism and Western capital at home itself could very well be in South Africa."²² And many pundits, especially area experts based in Washington and Moscow, expressed the view that southern Africa would succeed Vietnam as the epicentre of the Cold War.²³ The South African government adopted an ideology

²¹ David Williams, *On the Border: The White South African Military Experience 1965–1990* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2008), 117.

²² Cited in Magnus Malan, *My Life with the SA Defence Force* (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2006), 80.

²³ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 207; James Sanders, *South Africa and the International Media: A Struggle for Representation* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 152.

similar to that of the USA, one that essentially justified the conflicts as necessary to contain the spread of international communism and uphold Western civilisation. The rhetoric was different: American cold warriors invoked the domino theory that held forth the spectre of the collapse of Vietnam's neighbours to communism following the US defeat whereas apartheid's defenders spoke of the need to erect "buffer states" to combat the "total onslaught." Both these discourses were shaped by political cultures suffused with strident anti-communism, a paranoid fear of the Soviet Union, and an obsession with security. Hallin notes that "The ideology of the Cold War was ideally suited to the reduction of this complexity [of the nature of the conflict]: it related every crisis to a single, familiar axis of conflict."²⁴ The Cold War paradigm allowed South Africa to justify its interventions in Angola and its occupation of Namibia by claiming that it had positioned itself on the side of the West against Communism. The West, for its part, often applied double standards when it refused to condemn the apartheid regime's repression of and discrimination against black subjects for fear of alienating the strongest state in the African sub-continent. Sanders shows that American and British media were generally prepared to accept a different set of conditions for the country's black population because South Africa managed to convince itself and the West that it was an indispensable ally in the war against communism.²⁵

Soon after US forces completed their withdrawal from Saigon in 1975, SADF troops invaded Angola ostensibly to prevent SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation) from establishing bases in the southern part of the country from where it might infiltrate Namibia, which was illegally occupied by the SADF. A pretext was provided by the need to secure the Ruacana hydro-electric facility on the Angolan-Namibian border. It was a "false flag" operation analogous to the trumped-up Gulf of Tonkin incident that was used to convince the Johnson administration to step up its commitment to Saigon against Hanoi. The seizure of these

²⁴ Daniel Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1986), 50.

²⁵ Sanders, *South Africa and the International Media*, 8.

border sites provided a convenient cover story for the SADF's intervention after the fact.²⁶ It afforded a plausible deniability.

South Africa's subsequent intervention in Angola's civil war was an attempt to prevent the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) from gaining control of the country's capital, Luanda. Pretoria lent support to its allies, the FNLA (National Front for the Liberation of Angola) and UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola). According to some sources, the SADF served as a proxy for the USA, who was reluctant to commit combat troops to Angola after the loss of Vietnam.²⁷ However, others dismiss the contention that the US encouraged South African intervention and hold that it based its decision on strategic calculations derived from threat perceptions.²⁸ In any event, the SADF did not achieve its objectives following the arrival of Cubans after Castro unilaterally became determined to show solidarity with the MPLA government and support its armed forces in the face of the aggression by the racist apartheid regime.²⁹ The South African decision was also informed by worldwide condemnation of Pretoria's adventurism and its violation of Angola's territorial integrity. In the event, the SADF aborted Operation Savannah and withdrew its forces from Angola. Additionally, the Vietnam analogy preyed upon the minds of the SADF leadership. The "hawkish" Minister of Defence, P.W. Botha, apparently shared his unease with his generals about becoming bogged down in Angola.³⁰ In similar vein, General Magnus Malan, then Chief of the SADF, notes that the decision to invade Angola in 1975 was not taken lightly as he was concerned that South Africa might create its own Vietnam if it did so.³¹ Malan was possibly acquainted with the slippery slope and quagmire metaphors that

²⁶ James Miller, "Yes, Minister: Reassessing South Africa's Intervention in Angola, 1975," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15:3 (2013): 21–22.

²⁷ Matthew Graham, "Covert Collusion? American and South African Relations in the Angolan Civil War, 1975–76," *African Historical Review* 43:1 (2011): 35.

²⁸ Miller, "Yes, Minister," 41.

²⁹ Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, Pretoria* (Alberton: Galago, 1999).

³⁰ Geldenhuys, *Die Wat Wen*, 177 cited in Leopold Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966–1989* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2013), 334.

³¹ Malan, *My Life in the SADF*, 117.

were common in American discourse of the Vietnam War. Such metaphors suggested that it was difficult to extricate armed forces that were committed to prop up a regime that did not have popular support. The provision of advisers, troops and *matériel* had to make up for the inability of a client (or puppet) regime to fight its own battles. In fact, the Saigon regime and UNITA were equally dependent on their sponsors for their very survival. But withdrawal by their backers would amount to the loss of face and damage to the reputation of the sponsor state.

Cuba, under Castro's leadership, provided Luanda with significant support troops, as well as copious amounts of sophisticated military hardware to bolster the capacity of the People's Armed Forces of Liberation of Angola (FAPLA). Although the Cubans generally avoided direct engagement with the SADF, the armies were involved in a number of skirmishes in the in the early years of the war and full-blown battles in 1987–1988 culminating in the siege of Cuito Cuanavale. For its part, the Soviet Union supported the MPLA government with arms and advisors but was seldom drawn into the fighting.³² It became commonplace for the SADF to display captured Soviet or Eastern Bloc manufactured weapons as well as the occasional Cuban or Russian prisoner-of-war (POW) as proof the communist threat to the security of the white redoubt in the region. Such exercises were staged as propaganda coups but a gullible public seldom bothered to consider that whatever the origin of arms and ammunition, they have no ideology and no purpose other than to kill. Although the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries backed southern Africa's Marxist governments and national liberation movements ideologically, diplomatically, strategically and militarily, Soviet apologists insist that they never posed a threat to South Africa.³³ This did not prevent P.W. Botha, who held the defence portfolio as Prime Minister and then appointed Magnus Malan, in the portfolio when he became president, from ratcheting up the alarmist "total onslaught" discourse. Botha side-lined the "doves" in his

³² Vladimir Shubin, *The Hot "Cold War:" the USSR in Southern Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2008).

³³ Vladimir Shubin and Marina Traikova, "There is no threat from the Eastern Bloc," South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, Volume 3, *International Solidarity* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2008), 985–1067.

cabinet and articulated threat perceptions that turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy.³⁴ So his fear of an Angolan quagmire was realised.

In South Africa and Namibia, the black majority's "freedom fighter" was the white minority's "terrorist." Initially units of the South African Police (SAP) with counter-insurgency (COIN) training were tasked with combating "terrorism" but as the struggle intensified the SADF assumed increasing responsibility for security matters. The armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), was effectively neutralised until the late 1970s when it resorted to acts of armed propaganda. MK staged some spectacular sabotage operations against mainly military and industrial targets during the 1980s but never managed to operate openly above ground. PLAN (the Peoples' Liberation Army of Namibia) established a base temporarily at Omgulumbashe in the 1960s but was unable to replicate guerrilla tactics practiced in Cuba or Vietnam where liberated zones were the rule and not the exception – unlike the case of Namibia after the SADF assumed charge of COIN operations.³⁵ Initially, PLAN's lines of communication and infiltration were lengthy as it operated from its Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania) headquarters, but it was able to relocate to bases in Angola with the sanction of the MPLA government. Namibia's sub-tropical climate, combined with the flat, sandy landscape dotted with thick mopani savannah did not offer much cover to guerrillas infiltrating the country. The wet season (usually December to March) improved their chances of avoiding detection as the dense foliage provided a measure of concealment and rain erased tracks and provided drinking water. The ability of PLAN combatants to escape pursuing patrols while on foot in the semi-arid conditions won them the begrudging admiration of SADF soldiers. This was not unlike the respect that American GIs developed for National Liberation Front (NLF) or Viet Cong guerrillas who seemed at one with Vietnam's terrain of jungles, elephant grass, and rice paddies. The enervating climate sapped the energies of the US forces much more so than the NLF guerrillas. And their will to win a protracted conflict did not match the endurance of the Vietnamese

³⁴ Miller, "Yes, Minister," 31.

³⁵ Dale, "A Comparative Reconsideration of the Namibian Bush War," 205.

peasants who provided for them and were prepared to defend hamlet and homestead interminably. In short, the US forces were simply concerned with survival in a distant land in a war not of their own making or choosing. Whilst some SADF soldiers could not understand the purpose of fighting and dying for a “strip of desert,” the proximity of Namibia to South Africa gave some credibility to the argument that it was preferable to fight the “enemy” in a neighbour’s backyard than in one’s own. Moreover, the SADF was also dedicated to defending the small population of white “Suidwesters” who were regarded as South African citizens. There was no comparable American expatriate community in Vietnam.

Both the South African and American forces evinced a total disregard for the countries that they were occupying, as well as scant concern for its peoples. The US policy of “pacification” implemented in the countryside was an endeavour to place the peasant population under the protection of the US and South Vietnamese armies in order to prevent their villages from falling to the NLF. This frequently involved the forcible relocation of communities from their traditional lands into a more easily defensible compound in which they were dependent not on their own resources but US largesse for survival – as was the case with Operation Phoenix. This was exceptionally disruptive to the social fabric of Vietnamese society. The US forces and the South Vietnamese army made extensive use of defoliants such as Agent Orange and incendiary devices such as napalm to clear and destroy large areas of the natural habitat so as to prevent the NLF from hiding in areas where there was dense undergrowth. These acts did long-term damage to the environment, including the polluting of valuable water supplies. The US Air Force also carried out a systematic and prolonged campaign of area/carpet bombing that destroyed vast tracts of land and infrastructure and left tens of thousands of Vietnamese homeless. In fact, the US dropped more ordnance on Indochinese targets from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s than on European and Japanese cities during the Second World War and killed more people in the process.³⁶ The SADF

³⁶ Marilyn Young, “Bombing Civilians from the Twentieth to the Twenty-First Centuries,” – *Bombing Civilians: A Twentieth-Century History*, ed. Yuki Tanaka and Marilyn B. Young (New York: The New Press, 2009), 157.

did kill a large (but unknown) number of inhabitants of the “frontline states” in the name of safeguarding white security as its “destabilisation” policies caused considerable physical destruction, social dislocation, and psychological trauma throughout the region. The South African Air Force (SAAF) used cluster bombs but made sparing use of napalm and chemical weapons.³⁷ It had a small nuclear arsenal of only six bombs that it developed for deterrent purposes but never utilised.³⁸ If weapons of mass destruction were discounted by South Africa and the US as unnecessary to win their respective wars in southern Africa and south-east Asia, then this could be deemed a saving grace for the regions. But the deleterious legacy of these wars is still felt as a result of the thousands of undetected mines that were laid during these conflicts and which continue to kill and maim people.

For the most part, the Great Powers remained on the side-lines of the conflict in Angola/Namibia. The US government adopted a delicate balancing act supporting South Africa without appearing to endorse apartheid. Successive US administrations aided and abetted the survival of the country’s minority white regime that became something of a pariah state in the community of nations. The US deflected pressure brought to bear against the apartheid state on the economic, cultural and diplomatic fronts but rendered little military aid and chose not to bypass United Nations boycotts. Relations between the US and South Africa became strained when the former withdrew its clandestine support of the SADF’s invasion of Angola in 1975 and subsequently passed the Clark Amendment barring military aid. Because South Africa sought validation for its actions by way of American approval it nursed a strong resentment when this was withdrawn. Whilst South Africa’s relations with the US improved as result of the Reagan administration’s policy of “constructive engage-

³⁷ I have documented at least two occasions on which SAAF planes dropped napalm during aerial assaults on SWAPO bases in neighbouring states in the 1980s. And the Angolan authorities made unsubstantiated allegations that the SADF and/or UNITA deployed chemical gas during the battle of the Lomba River in 1987. See Gary Baines, “Review Article: From Uniformed Technocrat to Securocrat: Magnus Malan’s Memoir,” *Historia* 54:1 (2009): 321–322.

³⁸ Anna-Mart Van Wyk, “The USA and apartheid South Africa’s nuclear aspirations, 1949–1980,” – Onslow, *Southern Africa in the Cold War*,” 55–83.

ment,” the US could not be seen to be endorsing the former’s oppressive racist policies.³⁹ Still, the US condoned the apartheid regime’s obduracy in finding a political solution to the impasse in Namibia when it failed to implement the United Nations Security Council Resolution 435 and turned a blind eye to the apartheid regime’s destabilization of its neighbours. US support was arguably at least partly responsible for offsetting some of the effects of disinvestment and sanctions, but nonetheless South Africa’s economic and manpower resources were stretched to the limit by the Border War. In fact, the proportion of GDP spent on the defence budget increased about sixteenfold between 1974–75 and 1988–89.⁴⁰ Given the arms embargo and financial constraints, and notwithstanding the development of the local arms industry, the SADF leadership frequently bemoaned its lack of resources. Their American counterparts did likewise, although the USA armed forces were in a league of their own when it came to state-of-the-art weaponry.

Although US defence spending increased incrementally during the Vietnam War, there can be little doubt that South African society was far more thoroughly militarised during the 1970s and 1980s than was the US in the Vietnam War era. Still, American society has been infused with – even dominated by – military culture, values and goals and might be termed a “garrison state” on account of the influence of the military-industrial complex.⁴¹ This is not the place to detail the specificities of the situation and the workings of the security establishment of what has been called South Africa’s “garrison state” under P.W. Botha’s leadership.⁴² Suffice it to say, the articulation of Botha’s “total strategy” gave the securocrats who controlled the National Security Management System that sanctioned the illegal activities of the SAP, SADF, and other agencies of the

³⁹ J.E. Davies, *Constructive Engagement? Chester Crocker & American Policy in South Africa, Namibia & Angola* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007).

⁴⁰ Ian van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2015), 270.

⁴¹ Richell Bernazzoli and Colin Flint, “Embodying the garrison state? Everyday geographies of militarization in American society,” *Political Geography* 29 (2010): 157–166.

⁴² Bernard Magubane, “From Détente to the Rise of the Garrison State in South African Education Democracy Trust,” – *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 2 [1970–1980]* (Pretoria: Unisa Press 2006), 37–97.

state the means to subvert the legislature and seize control of the executive.⁴³ Simultaneously, socialisation in the homes, churches, and schools bred conformity that caused white males and their families to accept national service as a rite of passage and regard ongoing military duties (such as camps) as a necessary price to pay for upholding white power and privilege. In the US a disproportionate burden of bearing arms in Vietnam was the lot of minority groups who did not have the same stake in the system as South Africa's white ruling elite. South Africa apparently suffered more casualties as a proportion of the white population than the rate sustained by the US as a proportion of its total population.⁴⁴ Both the South African and American governments were wary that high casualty rates would become politically unsustainable. Neither the US nor South Africa were willing sacrifice their men in uniform to the extent that their respective enemies were prepared to do.⁴⁵ Fighting such a limited war was never going to guarantee victory at any price for either country.

In South Africa opposition to conscription gained some momentum from the mid-1980s as the demands made by the state on the cohort of young white males increased exponentially. Foremost amongst the groups that articulated opposition to the compulsory call-up was the End Conscription Campaign (ECC). The ECC made extensive use of artwork to counter the propaganda of the apartheid state. The Vietnam analogy was employed in the following poster.

The SADF soldier's hands appear to be inflicting damage upon Namibia. Yet, the image also seems to suggest that the occupying forces faced the spectre of defeat; that they would have to withdraw from Namibia as had been the case with American soldiers in Vietnam. The poster's design would have resonated with SADF soldiers who referred to Namibia/South West Africa as "Nam." These soldiers also referred to

⁴³ Dylan Craig, "Total Justification: Ideological Manipulation and South Africa's Border War," – Baines and Vale, *Beyond the Border War*, 56–74.

⁴⁴ According to Professor R. Green, the official death rate of white troops killed on the border, expressed as a proportion of all white South Africans, was three times that of the US forces in Vietnam. See *The Cape Times*, 4 Jan. 1985, cited in Catholic Institute of International Relations, *Out of Step: War Resistance in South Africa* (London: CIIR, 1989), 31.

⁴⁵ Rudham, "Lost Soldiers from Lost Wars," 36.



(ECC Archives, University of the Witwatersrand)

South Africa or home as “the States.” Their jargon suggests that they associated their presence in Namibia with being occupiers of a foreign land. But it was the deployment of troops in the townships to crush insurrection, thereby implying that ordinary black people were the “enemy,” that catalysed opposition to conscription and increased the numbers of citizen force members who ignored call-ups for camps. Although its relatively small size meant that the ECC remained a peripheral pressure group, attempts to suppress it suggest that the government feared the disruption of the national service system.⁴⁶ By comparison, American anti-war movements were able to mobilise growing numbers against the draft, and these included many veterans who joined organisations such as Vietnam

⁴⁶ Merran Phillips, “The End Conscription Campaign 1983–1988: A Study of White Extra-Parliamentary Opposition to Apartheid” (MA thesis, University of South Africa, 2002).

Veterans Against the War (VVAW). The Vietnam War became increasingly unpopular after the media exposure of the Tet offensive revealed that a US victory was neither imminent nor inevitable.⁴⁷ Indeed, opposition to the war coalesced across many sectors of society once it became apparent that US government and military spokespersons were deliberately manipulating and falsifying official news releases. The credibility gap became a yearning one. But contrary to Rudham,⁴⁸ I do not believe that the Border War ever became as unpopular as the Vietnam War.

The outcome of the Vietnam War meant that the US suffered a setback to its standing in the international community and its status as a super power. This created the so-called Vietnam syndrome that translated into reluctance by the US to interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries where the administration reckoned that its national interests were threatened. However, there was no accompanying domestic political crisis although the US had undoubtedly suffered a defeat in Vietnam. Nixon was brought down by Watergate and not Vietnam. The “fall” of South Vietnam also revealed the fallacy of the domino theory, for neighbouring south-east Asian states did not collapse to communism like a deck of cards (to mix my metaphors). In the southern African sub-continent the withdrawal of the SADF from Angola/Namibia and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435 was no less dramatic, especially as it occurred in tandem with the end of the Cold War and set in motion a sequence of events that culminated in South Africa’s transition to majority rule. The Namibian settlement was followed by a “ceasefire” in South Africa and a relatively peaceful political transition. Still, Botha’s successor, President Frederik Willem de Klerk, was regarded by right-wingers as having betrayed the Afrikaner and/or white “nation” especially after he purged the SADF for its apparent involvement in “third force” activities.⁴⁹ But the majority of the white electorate embraced – albeit with some trepidation – the dismantling of the apartheid edifice. Still, the South African government could claim – with some justification – that its military

⁴⁷ Hallin, *The Uncensored War*.

⁴⁸ Rudham, “Lost Soldiers from Lost Wars.”

⁴⁹ Hilton Hamann, *Days of the Generals* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2001).

forces were withdrawn from Angola and Namibia as part of a negotiated settlement. It could also claim that the SADF never really engaged with MK in battle as the latter was never able to wage anything more than a low-key war of insurgency. It insisted that any victory claimed by the liberation movements was mere politicking as the SADF had effected a tactical withdrawal for the sake of promoting a peaceful transition.

Retired SADF generals did not take kindly to attempts by the ANC government to hold them accountable for death squads that carried out assassinations, bizarre experiments with chemical weapons, and other nefarious activities that occurred under their watch. A clique of former generals obstructed the work of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in investigating gross violations of human rights by the military. They denied, for instance, that the Cassinga massacre was a war crime and defended the attack on this SWAPO camp in Angola as a military operation in which some refugees were caught in the cross-fire.⁵⁰ The SADF followed the lead of the US military that invented the euphemism “collateral damage” to justify the killing of innocent civilians.⁵¹ The immunity of non-combatants in modern warfare is a myth perpetrated by the US military that exhibits a culpable lack of concern for victims’ lives and property.⁵² Thus the indiscriminate slaughter of non-combatants in the infamous My Lai massacre was treated as an aberration rather than a consequence of the strategies pursued by US forces in Vietnam.⁵³ In this instance, a junior officer became the “fall guy” for his superiors. Although the SADF did charge a few of its personnel for heinous crimes such as murder and rape, in other instances reprehensible acts went unpunished because the President granted perpetrators immunity from prosecution for acts supposedly committed in good faith in the

⁵⁰ Gary Baines, “A Battle for Perceptions: Revisiting the Cassinga Controversy in Southern Africa” – *Theatres of Violence: The Massacre, Mass Killing and Atrocity in History*, ed. Philip Dwyer and Lyndall Ryan (New York: Berghahn, 2011), 226–241.

⁵¹ Stephen J. Rockell and Rick Halpern (eds.), *Inventing Collateral Damage: Civilian Casualties, War, and Empire* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2009).

⁵² Sahr Conway-Lanz, *Collateral Damage: Americans, Noncombatant Immunity and Atrocities after World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁵³ Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

line of duty.⁵⁴ The SADF held that it observed the rules of engagement despite not officially being at war with SWAPO and that the SADF's code of conduct was strictly enforced in the ranks. However, South Africa did not ratify the 1977 amendment to the Geneva Protocol that accorded captured "freedom fighters" the status of POWs. It was believed that granting POW status to PLAN or MK cadres would have legitimated the insurgency. Instead, captured ANC and SWAPO cadres were treated as "terrorists" and subjected to abuse and torture. Some were "turned" and became *askaris* (collaborators). The use of torture, ostensibly for gathering intelligence, became an integral part of American and South African operating procedures.⁵⁵ Wartime violence contributed to the brutalisation of both Vietnamese and South African society.

Although stories of the maltreatment of enemy soldiers have emerged in published accounts of the Border War, there has been a reluctance on the part of SADF veterans to accept responsibility for such acts. Whereas at least 100 US veterans confessed to having committed or witnessed atrocities in Vietnam during the Winter Soldier hearings of 1971,⁵⁶ there was no comparative admission of culpability by SADF generals or their foot soldiers before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).⁵⁷ Moreover, the SADF assumed no responsibility for the conduct of its proxies such as the paramilitary units Koevoet and Battalion 32, both of which had deservedly unsavoury reputations for their tactics, which included impersonating PLAN cadres and committing atrocities so as to discredit SWAPO. Subsequently, South Africa was able to secure immunity for any alleged atrocities its security forces may have committed, thereby protecting security forces personnel from extradition to Namibia. And the Namibian authorities declined to hold TRC-type hearings concerning allegations of misconduct by SADF members stationed in the country prior to independence probably because SWAPO wished to prevent revelations of the torture and detention of its own people by members of

⁵⁴ Dale, "A Comparative Reconsideration of the Namibian Bush War," 201.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵⁶ John Fitzgerald, "The Winter Soldier Hearings," *Radical History Review* 97 (2007): 118–122.

⁵⁷ Don Foster et al., *The Theatre of Violence: Narratives of Protagonists in the South African Conflict* (Cape Town: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2005).

the organisation in Angolan camps. The exposure of the “wall of silence” has not reduced the clamour for restitution of reputations and reparations by victims and their families.⁵⁸ If anything, the failure to make full disclosures has seen the issue become a festering wound in the Namibian body politic. Whereas Vietnam has left a scar that apparently binds US society,⁵⁹ southern African society’s wounds are still in need of suturing.

As with the aftermath of the Vietnam War, there has been something of a “silence” or selective amnesia with respect to the Border War. I have argued elsewhere that the absence of discourse on the Border War in the public sphere can be partly ascribed to the desire to construct a consensual past and new national identity – to the displacement of the divisions of apartheid by a preoccupation with making the “miracle” of the negotiated settlement work.⁶⁰ However, this silence is gradually being eroded, and former SADF conscripts are finding their voices, although they obviously do not speak as one. This much was evident in the controversy that followed the trustees of Freedom Park’s decision to omit the names of SADF veterans from the site’s Wall of Names.⁶¹ This “crisis of commemoration” echoes the tensions that followed the erection of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. in 1982. Whilst the American Memorial Wall has arguably done much to heal the wounds of the Vietnam War by affording veterans and the families and loved ones of those killed in the war a site at which to mourn their losses,⁶² in South Africa the commemoration of the Border War remains a fraught and unresolved issue. The loss of political power by the white minority meant that a wall of remembrance erected on Fort Klapperkop by the SADF to honour those killed serving their country has been divested of its symbolic power. It has been effectively eclipsed by a privately funded wall erected in the precinct

⁵⁸ Justine Hunter, “No Man’s Land of Time: Reflections on the Politics of Memory and Forgetting in Namibia,” – Baines and Vale, *Beyond the Border War*, 302–321.

⁵⁹ Keith Beattie, *The Scar that Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

⁶⁰ Baines, “Introduction,” – Baines and Vale, *Beyond the Border War*.

⁶¹ Gary Baines, “Site of Struggle: the Freedom Park Fracas and the Divisive Legacy of South Africa’s Border War/Liberation Struggle,” *Social Dynamics* 35:2 (2009): 330–344.

⁶² Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1998).

of the Voortrekker Monument. Certain SADF veterans reckon that they deserve public recognition for the sacrifices they made to build the “new” South Africa. If their quest for validation and sense of victimisation is not addressed, there is a possibility that contested memories about the part played by the SADF in the country’s past might revive sectionalisms and threaten the social cohesion and stability of South Africa’s fragile democracy.

The extant literature on the demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants – especially from the ranks of liberation movements who are called non-statutory forces – into post-apartheid South African society shows that they are seen by the public in terms of poor, stereotypical images.⁶³ Their reputation for being prone to violence and using military skills and weapons in criminal activities is as a result of publicity given to a few high-profile cases involving ex-combatants. But such demonization is underserved. Similarly, US Vietnam veterans were portrayed by the media as dysfunctional “outcasts” and “psychopaths.” They returned home to find that their nation, and even their own families, had disowned their responsibility for the war and were blaming them instead. The scapegoating of the veteran absolved the American public of complicity in the “bad” war as it did not challenge the myth of the US military as a force for moral good.⁶⁴ In many instances, veterans were obliged to repress rather than come to terms with traumatic memories. Vietnam veterans’ trauma was only belatedly recognised when post-traumatic stress disorder became a diagnostic category in 1980.⁶⁵ Acknowledgment of the work of the mental health profession and a changing political climate contributed to the rehabilitation of the Vietnam veteran. By contrast, little professional counselling has been available to ex-combatants from the ranks of both the statutory and non-statutory forces in post-apartheid South Africa. The TRC recognized the need for this but neither it nor veterans’

⁶³ Sasha Gear, *Wishing Us Away: Challenges Facing Ex-Combatants in the New South Africa*, Centre for the Study of Violence & Reconciliation, Violence & Transition Series No. 8 (Braamfontein: CSV, 2002).

⁶⁴ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: the Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1997), 66.

⁶⁵ Nigel C. Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

associations have the resources to provide such services. Some ex-combatants have found spaces to tell their stories on internet sites and others have shared their stories with mental health practitioners and journalists. Indeed, the destigmatisation of PTSD in recent years has fuelled SADF veterans' claims of victimhood that has, in turn, allowed them to voice their disaffection with the ANC government that is perceived to favour veterans of non-statutory forces with respect to the award of military pensions. Such setbacks to healing and reconciliation are likely to undermine any strategy designed to promote the nation-building project.

From imagination to instruction

Although the USA had suffered an ignominious defeat in Vietnam, and the conflict (as we have seen) was only partly analogous with the situation in southern Africa, the vocabulary of the Vietnam War became ubiquitous in the discourse of South Africa's armed formations. It also insinuated itself into the public consciousness. This can be ascribed to the close contemporaneity of the conflicts, as well as the saturation coverage thereof in popular media. Elsewhere, I have explained why the American experience of Vietnam resonated with white conscripts seeking to make sense of their experience of the Border War.⁶⁶ This section will reveal how the lessons of Vietnam were appropriated by protagonists in the conflict.

The SADF's counterinsurgency strategies in Namibia were modelled on the lessons derived from a range of revolutionary wars. Over the years, SADF personnel were sent for training at institutions in the UK, France, USA, and Israel. Malan, for instance, attended courses at Fort Leavenworth in 1962.⁶⁷ At this juncture, US forces had had little experience of counter-insurgency as they were only commencing with deployments in Vietnam and the Korean War had been an altogether different kind of undertaking. So the most successful models of counter-

⁶⁶ Gary Baines, "South Africa's Vietnam? Literary History and Cultural Memory of the Border War," *South African Historical Journal* 49 (2003): 172–192.

⁶⁷ Malan, *My Life in the SADF*, 42.

insurgency wars were deemed to be the British campaigns in Malaya and Kenya, and that of Ramon Magsaysay in the Philippines.⁶⁸ The French record of mounting counter-insurgency campaigns in Indo-China and Algeria was poor when measured simply in terms of outcomes but the resemblances between the situation in the North African colony with its well-entrenched settler minority and South Africa were striking. Closer to home, the SADF could draw upon the experience of having supported the Portuguese army in Angola during the last phase of that war, and knowledge gleaned from units such as the paratroopers deployed against guerrillas in Rhodesia. The SADF was also intent on testing its strategies against PLAN and adapting these and applying them against the armed wings (or guerrillas) of the South African liberation movements.

Notwithstanding the desultory record of the French army, the SADF brains trust were enamoured with their COIN doctrine which was drawn from their experience in Indochina and Algeria.⁶⁹ Lt. Gen. C.F. “Pops” Fraser, then Chief of the Army, was the doyen of SADF military thinkers on the subject of counterinsurgency and P.W. Botha’s “favourite military theorist.”⁷⁰ He introduced the writings of French COIN specialist André Beaufre, then Director of the French Institute for Security Studies, to the SADF. Beaufre’s classic text *An Introduction to Strategy* (1963) was the primary inspiration for Fraser’s manual entitled *Lessons Drawn from Past Revolutionary Wars* (1966). It was translated into Afrikaans and became prescribed reading for the SADF officer corps. Lessons gleaned from Beaufre, as well as the American military strategist John McCuen’s *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary Warfare: The Strategy of Counter-Insurgency* (1966), were set out in the course materials of the officer corps developed at the Saldanha Military Academy and training manuals produced for the troops.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Michael Burleigh, *Small Wars, Faraway Places: The Genesis of the Modern World. 1945–65* (London: Macmillan, 2013).

⁶⁹ See John Daniel, “Racism, the Cold War and South Africa’s regional security” – *Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Liberation*, ed. Sue Onslow (London: Routledge, 2009), 38.

⁷⁰ Stephen Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2001), 278.

⁷¹ Leopold Scholtz, *The SADF and the Border War 1966–1989* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2013), 36.

Although SADF COIN thinking adapted these lessons to suit regional conditions, it is doubtful whether the SADF intelligentsia developed and refined a thoroughly novel COIN doctrine.⁷² The SADF maxim was that the war was 20% military and 80% political, and so soldiers were deployed in civic action programmes (or psychological operations) designed to win the “hearts and minds” (WHAM) of Namibians.⁷³ In tandem with WHAM, the SADF conducted counterinsurgency operations that involved free fire zones, search and destroy missions, cross-border hot pursuit operations, and raids, and gauged success in terms of the body count. As with the US forces that adopted a policy of “Vietnamisation” so as to restrict the escalation of its own troop levels, the SADF resorted to the “Namibianisation” of the war to limit casualties amongst white conscripts. This involved introducing conscription to Namibia in 1980 and the establishment of the South West African Territorial Force (SWATF) whose members were 70 percent black.⁷⁴ Thus both the US and SA forces sought to hand over increased responsibility for fighting to their allies amongst the local and/or indigenous population in their respective theatres of war. The SADF preferred not to deploy large numbers of its troops and equipment at any one time by avoiding large-scale engagements with the Angolan and Cuban forces. It also “outsourced” much of its fighting to surrogates such as UNITA. And it adopted a form of warfare that combined a motorised infantry with superior firepower that performed well in the vast spaces of the Angolan-Namibian bush. This tradition of mobile warfare dates back to the commando system and might well be called the “South African way of war.”⁷⁵ It was developed with the terrain and the low-density population of the sub-continent in mind and resembled American strategy in Vietnam that saw no benefit in holding ground for its own sake. This practice was inexplicably abandoned during the (set-piece) battle of Cuito Cuanavale where attrition became the order of the day.

⁷² Richard Dale, “A Comparative Reconsideration of the Namibian Bush War, 1966–89,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18:2 (2007): 201.

⁷³ Dale, “A Comparative Reconsideration,” 202.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Ian van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2015), 3, 261.

SADF generals insisted that they had learnt from the mistakes of the Americans in Vietnam and to have adapted their tactics accordingly. The SADF recognised the necessity of maintaining continuity in operations and opted for a system whereby troops were deployed in their units in the “operational area” for periods ranging from 3 to 12 months – depending whether they were national servicemen or citizen force members. In other words, the SADF soldiers generally served for shorter periods, but care was taken to ensure continuity between those departing and those being deployed. This helped circumvent the problem of the loss of institutional knowledge that the US forces in Vietnam faced as a result of the constant rotation of individuals who completed their 365 days’ tours of duty. There was also a greater age differential amongst the SADF troops as both national service and citizen force units were deployed.⁷⁶ SADF apologists also claimed that their troops were tougher and more disciplined than the US forces in Vietnam, even asserting that there was no “drug problem” in the SADF.⁷⁷ Anecdotal evidence contradicts these unfounded claims made to impress upon the West that the SADF was not only capable of producing the finest armed force on the African continent but that it was even capable of teaching the Americans a thing or two about waging a counterinsurgency war.

Unlike the Vietnam War, media coverage of the Angolan/Namibian War was censored. For instance, the South African news “blackout” of the Angolan invasion of 1975–1976 was exposed by foreign journalists. And when the story broke, an attempt was made by the government to cajole newspaper editors to agree not to publish disclosures that did not emanate from official sources.⁷⁸ Invoking national security, the state restricted access to information, while disinformation and propaganda was fed to an undiscerning public. The SADF had its own mouthpiece in

⁷⁶ Gretchen Rudham, “Lost Soldiers from Lost Wars: A Comparative Study of the Collective Experience of Soldiers of the Vietnam War and the Angolan/Namibian Border War” (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 2003), 24.

⁷⁷ Sheila Roberts, “The Invisible Enemy: South African Border War Narratives” – *Readings in the Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, ed. R. Grangvist (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 97–98.

⁷⁸ Graeme Addison, “Censorship of the press in South Africa during the Angolan War: A Case Study of News Manipulation and Suppression” (MA thesis, Rhodes University, 1980).

the magazine *Paratus*, but the government also used slush funds to establish front organisations that published newspapers such as *The Citizen* and periodicals like *To the Point* to propagate its agenda. The mainstream media – the Afrikaans and English press, as well as the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) that monopolised radio and television broadcasts (the latter from 1976) – lent their unqualified support to the SADF as the provider of security and stability in the country but prevaricated when it came to recognizing the legitimacy of its operations in Angola/Namibia. Otherwise, the SADF attempted to win over independent local media by inviting carefully vetted (photo)journalists and military correspondents to visit SADF units in the operational area. These journalists were more like their “embedded” counterparts in the Gulf Wars than those who operated outside of military strictures in Vietnam. The mistaken lesson learned by the apartheid regime from the Vietnam War was that unrestricted media coverage of war could undermine public support for the war effort. The media might have created greater awareness of the situation, even contributed to the growth of opposition to the war, but it alone was not responsible for the decline of political will to see the war through. The Vietnam War was actually lost on the battlefield and the messenger became a convenient scapegoat. In fact, South African censorship fuelled rumour mongering and undermined civilian morale and was counter-productive as far as sustaining support for the fighting in Angola/Namibia.⁷⁹ While the majority of the white electorate was inclined to accept official news releases at face value, the black populace treated them with increasing credulity. Although the liberation movements could not compete with the apartheid state in terms of resources, the ANC still managed to recruit cadres to undergo military training abroad through its Radio Freedom broadcasts.

From the vantage point of exile, the ANC leadership drew rather different lessons from Vietnam than the SADF hierarchy. The organisation became convinced that they were capable of humbling a militarily powerful adversary like the apartheid state by adopting the strategy of a people’s war – the mobilisation of the bulk of the population in the war

⁷⁹ Baines, “Introduction,” 10.

effort.⁸⁰ The organisation's delegation that visited Vietnam in 1978 came away with the distinct impression that too much emphasis had been placed on the armed struggle at the expense of political mobilisation. The primacy of political imperatives in the armed struggle, an approach in keeping with Maoist approach to guerrilla war, was given due recognition in *The Green Book: Lessons from Vietnam*, which was published in 1979 with the imprimatur of the ANC's national executive committee.⁸¹ This blueprint for waging a protracted people's war advocated, inter alia, restructuring MK and forging a network of armed units that would ultimately constitute a people's revolutionary army, improving MK's military training programmes so as to enable it to mount attacks against security targets and the establishment, and stepping up propaganda and agitation. Such a strategic review would compensate for ANC weakness vis-à-vis the apartheid security forces. It offered a way of defeating Pretoria politically without having to engage in a military confrontation that MK had no hope of winning. According to Jeffery, it mattered very little to the ANC that the situation in Vietnam was very different from that pertaining in South Africa.⁸² In other words, "the objective conditions for a people's war in the Vietnamese sense did not exist."⁸³ If that was the case, then Vietnam did not serve so much as a model to be emulated but a morale booster – as affirmation that victory could be secured irrespective of the odds.

It has been charged that the ANC never sought to defeat the South African security forces on the battlefield but gave priority to eliminating its political rivals, the other liberation movements.⁸⁴ Similar claims have been made with respect to Vietnam. This line of arguments holds that the

⁸⁰ Stephen Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2011), 123; Anthea Jeffery, *People's War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa* (Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2009), 26.

⁸¹ Ellis, *External Mission*, 123; Jeffery, *People's War*, 41.

⁸² Jeffery, *People's War*, xxxiv, 39. She holds that parallels between the two situations were remarkable but chooses to enumerate differences instead.

⁸³ Pdraig O'Malley, *Shades of Difference: Mac Maharaj and the Struggle for South Africa* (New York: Viking, 2007), 208 cited in Ellis, *External Mission*, 282.

⁸⁴ Jeffery, *People's War*: xxxiii–iv. This charge has been contemptuously dismissed by MK veteran Mac Maharaj in his review of Jeffery's book. See "History 101, Anyone?" *Sunday Times*, 13 September 2009.

Vietcong (or National Liberation Front, NLF) the guerrilla army based in South Vietnam, was purposefully targeted for elimination by the North Vietnamese during the 1968 Tet offensive. It is reckoned that the NLF was deliberately sent into battle inadequately trained and equipped to withstand American firepower, while the more formidable regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units were held in reserve. It is suggested that this tactic was pursued because the North Vietnamese feared that the Vietcong would not join the communist alliance but form an opposition grouping when the country was re-united. This argument has a number of flaws. If the Vietcong was virtually eliminated, it begs the question as to why Operation Phoenix that identified and removed VC cadres from the field was necessary. It also ignores the substantial evidence that the VC played a significant role in the liberation of South Vietnam after the withdrawal of US forces. As Peter Brush concludes, not only is there irrefutable evidence that the Vietcong were not eliminated in 1968, they were an important component of communist strategy to the very end of the war.⁸⁵ The same can be said of the “comrades” who formed themselves into armed militias and emulated ANC strategy as far as they understood it. While not part of the ANC’s command structure, they armed and constituted themselves as members of township street committees that rendered the country “ungovernable.”⁸⁶ They might not have been instrumental in overthrowing the apartheid state, but the “comrades” contributed to its demise.

Realistic assessments of the prospects of the triumph of the armed struggle tempered hopes that tanks would trundle into the streets of Pretoria as had been the case when the NVA overran Saigon. Yet, the Vietnam analogy was an inspiration to the ANC leadership in exile as well as those operatives who infiltrated the country. When reflecting upon the significance of the visit by the ANC delegation to Vietnam nearly three decades earlier, President Thabo Mbeki called Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap inspirational leaders and strategists.⁸⁷ And former MK

⁸⁵ Peter Brush, “The Significance of Local Communist Forces in Post-Tet Vietnam,” <https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/Vietnam/pbsignif.html> (accessed 4 April 2017).

⁸⁶ Janet Cherry, *Umkhonto weSizwe* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2011), 90–91.

⁸⁷ Cited in Anthea Jeffery, *People’s War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa* (Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2009), xxxiii.

combatant Joseph Kobo recalls entering South Africa via routes through Botswana, Rhodesia, and other frontline states dubbed the Ho Chi Minh trail.⁸⁸ Whether these names or even the story of the anti-colonial struggle in Vietnam was familiar to the ANC's rank and file is a moot point. But there was a mystique to the name Vietnam.

As far as the generals of the SADF were concerned, the lessons to be gleaned from the Vietnam analogy were salutary. In tandem with their own experience and that derived from studying the literature on other counterinsurgency wars, the lessons of Vietnam could provide a winning formula. They believed that if these were applied then victory might be assured.⁸⁹ So from the perspective of the SADF combating the military wings of the ANC and SWAPO, Vietnam offered a negative model. Conversely, the ANC regarded it as providing positive pointers for successfully defeating the apartheid state. These diametrically opposed lessons serve to underscore the argument that the lessons to be derived from analogies might be instructive but by no means definitive.

Conclusion

It seems fair to conclude that the Vietnam analogy does not amount to a valid historical comparison between the conflicts in south-east Asia and southern Africa. It is simply a figure of speech with rhetorical valence. It might be good for purposes of instruction, but is bad for a nuanced appreciation of history. However, the vocabulary of Vietnam undeniably evokes collective memory and contributes to a sense of shared experience.⁹⁰ This is precisely why it appears to have so much purchase in the public domain, especially for those with limited knowledge of the events

⁸⁸ Joseph Kobo, *Waiting in the Wings: The Electrifying Story of a Bishop Who Was once in the Military Wing of the ANC* (Milton Keynes: Nelson Word, 1994).

⁸⁹ Jannie Geldenhuys, *At the Front: A General's Account of South Africa's Border War* (Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2009).

⁹⁰ Brian Balogh, "From metaphor to quagmire: the domestic legacy of the Vietnam War," – *After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War*, ed. Charles E. Neu (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 2000), 52.

being compared. This applies equally to military and political leaders who are inclined to treat history as nothing more than a series of lessons that can be applied to find solutions to present predicaments. For them history has utilitarian value but little else. Obviously such an approach to history should not be condoned, let alone validated. I have made a concerted effort to avoid doing so in this paper.

My narrative has proffered a string of resemblances between conflicts in southern Africa and south-east Asia. I have attempted to provide a multi-layered account of these conflicts. It might be argued that my comparisons are too neat and tidy – that my exposition is skewed towards highlighting the similarities rather than the differences between these wars. Moreover, my approach might be said to hinder rather than assist our understanding of the complexities of these respective conflicts. This is no doubt true. On the other hand, I have resisted the reductionism characteristic of comparative diplomatic and political thinking – even of much military history. Instead, I have viewed the Vietnam War as an historical event and not simply as a lesson. So I have not sought to plumb the past for easy lessons. In fact, I am not persuaded that military and political leaders actually learn from the past. For them history provides a rhetorical device rather than an analytical tool and serves a political rather than a pedagogical purpose.

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