

Volume 18, Number 3, February 2016

### Exam focus

## OCR: The USA's Cold War in Asia

*Elizabeth Francis*

This resource presents a sample introduction and commentary to an OCR-style Section A question for The Cold War in Asia, 1945–1993.

### Question

To what extent was the Vietnam War lost due to the failure of American military tactics?

(30 marks)

The exam board guidance states for level 5 there should be a sustained focus on the question, with accurate and detailed knowledge deployed. The knowledge should be evaluated in order to reach a clear judgement.

### Answer with commentary

Over the course of the war in Vietnam the USA adopted a number of military strategies, but despite the advantages of superior firepower and technology, they were all severely flawed. It can be argued that the failure of these tactics and strategies led to the USA's eventual defeat in Vietnam.

First, search-and-destroy missions were used extensively by US soldiers. As the war became more aggressive after the Tet Offensive, so did the missions. Soldiers became indiscriminate in their attacks in Vietnamese villages, and this was particularly clear in the My Lai massacre in 1968. This mission turned into a 'Zippo' raid and the village was burnt down. Many innocent villagers were killed. This made the job of winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people much more difficult. The failure of this tactic also played into the hands of the Viet Cong, who could often turn them to their advantage, particularly as many search-and-destroy missions left US soldiers open to ambush. The Viet Cong was able to gain control in many southern areas as well as receive more unconditional support from South Vietnamese peasants, who could provide personnel, food and hiding places.

The Americans were stuck in a vicious circle. The more aggressive they became, the more Vietnamese people turned against them and the less effective their missions were. The Viet Cong might be pushed out of certain territories initially, but as soon as American patrols left the areas, the Viet Cong would return with even more reinforcements and weapons. Clearly, this tactic, which was relied upon heavily by US generals, was ineffective and could be argued to be part of the reason for the failure of US military tactics. The war planners had made the assumption that attrition warfare would defeat the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese army, but this was not the case. As immense numbers of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops were killed or captured, they were soon replaced, and in even greater numbers.

Similarly, the tactic of body count, which was used as an indicator of the success of the search-and-destroy missions, was often inaccurate. The figures were usually obtained and gathered through indirect means such as sightings of secondary explosions, sensor readings, extrapolation, inference or reports of POWs. They created a general over-optimism among US commanders and policy makers, and were often used as propaganda to convince the public of their success in Vietnam. Therefore body-count figures need to be deflated by 30% as roughly one third of the reported enemy killed might have been civilians.

Similarly, Operation Rolling Thunder, another tactic used by the USA, was also seen largely as a failure. US aircraft had flown more than 300,000 sorties and dropped about 643,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnam. According to an estimate by the CIA, damage inflicted by US bombardment in North Vietnam was about \$370 million in physical destruction and 90,000 casualties, including 72,000 civilians. However, it was generally seen as an ineffective campaign as it could not achieve any of its objectives effectively. First, the bomb raids could not destroy the morale of the North. Ironically, Hanoi even used the air strikes as propaganda to encourage North Vietnamese people to fight against the US more aggressively. Second, despite heavy bombardment, men and materials continued to flow from North to South Vietnam.

Both Operation Rolling Thunder and Search and Destroy were crucial elements of US tactics in Vietnam. Their failure only highlighted the fact that despite their superior finance and technology, they could not compete with the Viet Cong.

This answer is perhaps a little long, particularly if completed under timed conditions. There is a great deal of knowledge deployed and some excellent statistics to support points. The candidate makes some clear links to the question and evaluates the failure of US tactics. Improvements might include references to a wider range of tactics, as well as some comparison between the failure of US tactics compared to other reasons for failure, perhaps making greater comparisons between Viet Cong and US tactics

This resource is part of MODERN HISTORY REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to: <http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreview>