Framing Questions
Interviewer

For the transcriber youâ€™re going to need to state your name and title and spell it.

Gian Gentile

Colonel Gianâ€” I got to spell it? Spell my first name outâ€”OK, I donâ€™t have to spell Colonel, do I? [Laughter]

Interviewer

No, no, I think she knows how to do that. [Laughter]

Gian Gentile

Colonel Gian P. Gentile. First name is spelled G-I-A-N.

Interviewer

You prefer Gian, notâ€”is it Gian Carlo?

Gian Gentile

Well, actually my middle name is Perry. Both my parents are Italianâ€”it should be Gian Perry, but itâ€™sâ€”

Interviewer

I see.

Gian Gentile

So yeah, Gian Carlo is a common Italian name.

Interviewer

Yours is actually Gian Perry.

Gian Gentile

My middle name is Perry.

Interviewer

Is it Gian Carlo Perry?

Gian Gentile

Itâ€™s Gian Perry Gentile.

Interviewer

And it is spelled G-I-A-N?

Gian Gentile

Right, and then a middle name, itâ€™s split into two. Where if it was traditional Italian it would be rolled into one, and it would be Gian Perry and then Gentile, G-E-N-T-I-L-E.

Interviewer

Right, but how do you want to be?

Gian Gentile

Gian

Interviewer

But no Perry?

Gian Gentile

No Perry, no I get beat up for that. Ringquist would kick my ass if he saw that, just kidding [crosstalk]â€¦How could I be Gian Perry with these tanker boots on, you knowâ€¦

Interviewer

â€¦Why donâ€™t we begin by your telling us kind of in a capsule, the storyâ€" actually if you could turn and face me this way so youâ€™re more comfortable. Whatâ€™s distinctive about the end of the Vietnam War with respect to the themes that merged in this conference?

Gian Gentile

Let me just refresh, what weâ€™reâ€"

Interviewer

We can back up if you want, tell the story of the war in some kind of detail and then weâ€™ll move to theâ€"

Gian Gentile

I guess the story of the war for me is I interpret it when I wrote this essay, when I was doing the research, and once I started writing and hammering out the essay, that really the story of the war for me is still grounded and really made sense by George Herringâ€™s classic formulation of the war that heâ€"when he first wrote his book, Americanâ€™s Longest War. George Herring said that the war wasnâ€™t winnable based on a moral and material cost that the United States people were willing to pay. So that basic interpretation of the war was on my mind when I researched and wrote the essay.

Gian Gentile

That I think also mixed really tightly with a lot of themes that resonate powerfully today with [the wars in] Iraq and Afghanistan, the notion of a better war, the notion that better generals can turn a war around. The notion that has been put forward by people like Lewis Sorley, who argues that the Vietnam War was actually won in the south because of General Abrams. That whole theme had been built on in the 1980â€™s aroundâ€"based on a number of works that took that and then said the Vietnam War could have been won if the Army would have done things differently, if it adjusted its tactics and operations appropriately, all those kinds of things.

Gian Gentile

But again, those things fly in the face of George Herringâ€™s formulation, which I think is still right, that the war was not winnable nor do I think was the war, to begin with, in our vital national interest. So then I get into the research and the writing of the final years of the war and the termination and the ending of the war, so sort of the main theme, or question to me, is how did the United States end a war that it had already lost and one that it started that was unwinnable? Those were my framing questions.

Interviewer

One of the points you make is that we could have continued the war as long as wanted to, effectively, militarily prop up the South Vietnamese, right?

Gian Gentile

I think that would haveâ€"I donâ€™t even, you know, think that wasâ€"by 1971 or certainly by the first month of â€™72 as the United States is getting ready to completely leaveâ€" that even continuing the war politically in the United States was just not feasible. I mean, Nixon wanted to continue the war, he would have probably preferredâ€"Kissinger certainly wantedâ€"neither of the two, but especially Kissinger never liked the idea of a timeframe to leave because they felt thatâ€"which they were rightâ€"it gave them a much weaker position in the negotiations, but they both knew.

Interviewer

Same theme weâ€™re facing.

Gian Gentile

Right, which is another thing I had on my mind is Iraq and Afghanistan more so because it does look like weâ€™re leaving Iraq, who knows what weâ€™re going to do or will do in Afghanistan, but politically, it wasnâ€™t feasible for Nixon to stay even if he wanted to because by â€™71 Congress was passing laws that preventedâ€"that would eventually prevent the resourcing of the war.

Gian Gentile

Even, Nixon is reelected in â€™72, but it becomes significant because even though heâ€™s re-elected, the number of seats in the House and the Congress for Republicans who were favorable toward continuing the war was getting smaller and smaller. It was clear that politically the Congress was going to bring about an end to the war one way or another.

Interviewer

Back to your point that the war was not winnable at a price that we were willing to pay

Gian Gentile

Right, but we continueâ€"the tragedy of ending the Vietnam War isâ€"Iâ€™ve thought about this a lot, and I think Roger Spiller is correct when he says that for the United States the key critical, terminal campaign was the Tet Offensive. Itâ€™s afterâ€"itâ€™s at the Tet Offensive and after when the war truly, for the United States, is stalemated, we canâ€™t stay there.

Interviewer

Letâ€™s back upâ€”

Gian Gentile

So then you go from mid-1968 to the end of 1972, three years, 20,000 Americans are killed, not to mention 100,000 or more Vietnamese. How do you end a war thatâ€™s already lost?

Stumbling into Vietnam
Interviewer

Letâ€™s back up and tell the story a little bit of our engagement in Vietnam, get to the Tet Offensive so we can understand this context and coming to it fresh. Letâ€™s start with the post-war period that you do in the essay, the French into China and Dien Bien Phu, and it sort of bring us in.

Gian Gentile

To understand Vietnam and Americaâ€™s participation in the Vietnam War, it has to start with World War IIâ€”even drawing back a little bit further. At the start of the 20th Century, you really start to see the zenith and then really starting with the British and the Boer War in South Africa, the weakening of the major European empires. And that process really comes to its completion with World War II, and so much of the next 40 years is really the story of the decolonization of European empires, like French, like Brittan, retracting, pulling themselves in and what happens during that process of decolonization. And Vietnam is a part of that whole process, but that is combined and interacting with the rise of the Soviet Union, of international communism, of Maoist communism in China. And so you have the spread of communist states and communist revolution and that is also linked, of course, within these countries that were foreign European colonies to desires for nationalism.

Interviewer

This I think is a very important point, and to make and make clear here, the U.S. is actually an anti-colonial voice in this mix initially, right? Except for the competing issues of the Soviet Union.

Gian Gentile

Sure. The United States is an anti-traditional European colonial voice. The United States is very much about establishing a world order that is conducive to its security, economic and cultural interest. Some historians call that, although in different words, a form of empire.

Gian Gentile

So the United States is certainly not in line with supporting France and Brittan in reestablishing their colonial empires [BKGGG5], but the United States still wants to construct a world order after World War II that is conducive to its interests and the essential rub, the problem, which brings about the Cold War, the Soviet Union and China, and communism, which ideologically threatens and sometimes does actually threaten those interests.

Interviewer

The reason I raise this is because this is a rub between the U.S. and France and between

the U.S. and Brittan, too, in the 1950â€™s that theyâ€™d be urged to pull us in as the only remaining strong power at this point. And theyâ€™re urged to want to have us reassert their own colonialism, the French wanted that initially certainly. But Eisenhower and the American State Department wereâ€” weâ€™re not on the same page with you.

Gian Gentile

Yeah, but again, theyâ€™re not on the same page, but theyâ€™re different chapters in the same bookâ€”if that metaphor works, right. Because the United States did supply France close to 80 percent of its materiel when France was trying to reestablish itself as a colonial power in Indo-China.

Interviewer

But they did it for different reasons, right?

Gian Gentile

Right. The United States after World War II is not comfortable with maintaining these European colonial empiresâ€”however that dislike flies in the face of the American main vital interest in the world, which is Europe, and confronting the Soviet Union in Europe, and building a western Europe that can deal with the Soviet Unionâ€”and France is a critical player in that.

Gian Gentile

So it has toâ€”it ends up accommodating France and its desires and interests in other parts of the world to get what it needs from France in Europe, which is why it goes along with and supports France in reestablishing it as a colonial empire. [BKGGG6] Plus there is alsoâ€”for the United Statesâ€”a cause or a rationale for doing that and that is its supporting Franceâ€”â€˜yeah, okay, France is still a colonial Empire, weâ€™ll support them because they are fighting or dealing with a greater threat to American interest, which is the spread of communism.â€™

Interviewer

So set the scene then. Indo-China coming apart, French wanting to pull out, they canâ€™t sustain it economically, and they probably donâ€™t have the will either, Algeria is about to explode. So youâ€™re really in this period where the French are virtually saying, letâ€™s pull the plug, but they donâ€™t want to do so unless the U.S. sort of comes in and backs them up.

Gian Gentile

Right. The U.S. had been backing them up, and they backed them up so well that the French really put themselves in a really untenable position at Dien Bien Phu in late 1953 and early 1954. The French still wantedâ€”the French hadnâ€™t given up. The French were asking the United States for more resourcesâ€”in fact, the French asked the United States in careful ways to maybe, possibly, use nuclear weapons. [President] Eisenhower of the United States says no, Eisenhower of the United States also says no to a commitment of ground forces into Indo-China. Which brings aboutâ€”after Dien Bien Phu, the situation is such that itâ€™s in the interest of the fighting sides to come to a table to negotiate an end to the war. The North Vietnamese communists, the Viet Minh, they think theyâ€™ve won and in a lot of ways theyâ€™ve had.

Interviewer

Explain what Dien Bien Phu was for those who donâ€™t know.

Gian Gentile

It was an established post around an airfield in the northeastern part of what during the Vietnam War was North Vietnam and what today would be Vietnam total. Itâ€™s up in the northeastern part of Vietnam, and the French had adopted an operational method to try to inject their forces into key points in the hinterland, where the Viet Minh was at so they could fight them and also establish control of major roads and things like that. Rightly or wrongly, it ended up being wrongly, it was a flawed operational method, and it ended up putting an airborne regiment on this little post that protected an airfield, but was surrounded by large mountains.

Gian Gentile

That the Vietnamese communist army, the Viet Minh, under the leadership of General Giap, very effectively surrounded, put artillery up on the hills, and then eventually annihilated the French at that position, which turned out to be a significant battle because it forced the French to accept that they could not defeat the Viet Minh militarily. They were also out of money, and the United States wasnâ€™t going to commit ground forced or significant amounts of air power, namely nuclear weapons, which then leads to the Geneva Accordsâ€"Conference where the agreement is made to separate the country into two between the north and the south. Which the Vietnamese communists were not at all happy about, they wanted the French out completely, and they didnâ€™t want a South Vietnam that was going to be allies continuously with the French and then later the United States.

Gian Gentile

But the Soviet Union and China pushed North Vietnam into agreeing of a division of the country, which was only supposed to be temporary, and there were supposed to be national elections held in 1956, but that didnâ€™t happen.

Interviewer

Weâ€™re getting ahead of ourselves with respect to Dien Bien Phu, explain, the nuclear weapons would have been used on whom?

Gian Gentile

The French would have wanted a couple of relatively small tactical nuclear weapons to be placed on the Viet Minh armies, divisions, that were attacking them at Dien Bien Phu, so they would have been used to attack the Vietnamese communist military formations that were in the field attacking the French at Dien Bien Phu.

Interviewer

And the request was actually made?

Gian Gentile

It went through the French, and it ended up in the hands of Admiral Arthur Radfordâ€" who got it, one way or the other, to President Eisenhower, and President Eisenhower eventually said, â€œNo, weâ€™re not going to do that,â€ so it didnâ€™t happen for a good reason in a lot of ways.

Interviewer

So the settlement is dividing up the country and election[s] supposedly [planned] for â€™56, but the elections never materialized, why?

Gian Gentile

Becauseâ€¦the newly formed South Vietnamese government, under Ngo Dinh Diem, he knew that if he went ahead with elections he would lose, because of the strength of the communists, especially in the countryside. So he knew that he would lose, and it was after 1956 and the cancelled elections that were supposed to happen that Diem carried out, actually a very effective campaign to destroy the remaining communists that were in the country in South Vietnam.

Gian Gentile

And it actually produced results and that was one of the reasons why the North Vietnamese by 1959 started to actively provide materiel and manpower support to the South Vietnamese communists because of the effectiveness of Diemâ€™s campaign against them. Which then sets the stage really for the increased American involvement in South Vietnam becauseâ€"to what the North Vietnamese start doing in 1958 and 1959, largely in response to Diemâ€™s campaign to the remaining South Vietnamese communists that were still in the south. Thatâ€™s when a large number of communists from North Vietnam begin to move into the south, thatâ€™s when North Vietnam starts to provide materiel support to the South Vietnamese communists. That continues to build and build and build, and you start to have the formation of South Vietnamese communists, they begin to be referred to as Viet Cong in 1960. Theyâ€™ve formed military formations, infantry companies, battalions, regiments, and they are receiving supplies, guns, ammunition, mortars from the north.

Interviewer

What is our level of participation at this point?

Gian Gentile

Well those are the early years of the significant advisory effort under Kennedy. From â€™60 toâ€™64, itâ€™s about, thereâ€™s a 15,000 to 20,000 man increase during those years on the American sideâ€"and itâ€™s still largely advisory. Itâ€™s when you have the Special Forces there.

Gian Gentile

â€¦The South Vietnamese Army, the Army of Republic of Vietnam, is built around an American model, but they have all kinds of problems. They donâ€™t fight well, thereâ€™s rampant corruption. Itâ€™s the same story that continues throughout the Vietnam War. Itâ€™s not just the ARVNâ€"itâ€™s the South Vietnamese government as well.

Gian Gentile

Essentially what keeps South Vietnamâ€™s government and its military intact and able to hold out ultimately is the application of American firepower, which is a theme that I develop a lot on the essay on Vietnam. Thatâ€™s critical in the beginning, and it becomes really the only thing that holds the place together in the final years of the war.

Gian Gentile

So the United States between 1960 and 1964 increases its advisory role. It adds more Special Forces, more trainers, more people, mostly military, but some civilian who can funnel in resources and supplies to build the ARVN, to build the South Vietnamese Air Force, itâ€™s small navy, to try to do economic infrastructure buildingâ€”all those kinds of things.

Gian Gentile

The United States has embarked on the campaign of national building, but what happens byâ€”early 1964 is that the North Vietnamese enter the war and so whenever one side acts the other side reacts and that just keeps going on and on as a cycle. The North Vietnamese begin to infiltrate their armyâ€”parts of their army into South Vietnam.

Gian Gentile

The situation becomes critical, thereâ€™s a number of significant tactical defeats of the ARVN by the South Vietnamese communists and the North Vietnamese regular army, which again by late â€™64, Westmoreland is asking for a significant commitment of American ground forcesâ€¦

Interviewer

â€¦Speak to me a little about the American command structure here. Westmoreland becomes the general officer in charge during the Kennedy years?

Gian Gentile

Right. Westmoreland goes to Vietnam in 1964, takes over from a guy named Harkins and assumes command of what is called the Military Advisory Command Vietnamâ€”(MACV). When Westmoreland first takes over in 1964, again the mission in Vietnam is still largely one of advice and support

Interviewer

Tell me a little about who Westmoreland was?

Gian Gentile

He is a highly respected, he is, at least in 1964, you could have called him the General Petraeus of 1964. He was a fast burnerâ€”he was the superintendent at West Point here, from 1962 to 1964. He graduated from West Point in 1936, he was an artillery man. Heâ€”in the early years of American involvement in World War II and North Africa, he gets linked up as an artillery battery commander initially with the airborne units. And he does very well as an artillery commander in the newly forming airborne units as a part of the Normandy invasion, then becomes the Chief of Staff of an Infantry division in World War II.

Gian Gentile

Then after World War II, he stays an artilleryman, but he had spent so much time with Light Infantry, especially the Airborne, that in the Korean War he commands an Infantry regiment in the 101st Airborne, as an artilleryman. And does reasonably well, continues to progress through the ranks, and, I think, itâ€™s in 1958 or 1959 he takes command of the 101st Airborne, commands it, and then from there goes to West Point, becomes a superintendent [from 1960-1963], and then from there ends up as the overall commander in Vietnam in 1964.

Interviewer

What are his strengths and weaknesses? I think it would be interesting to make this comparison a little bit later between Abrams and Westmorelandâ€”they essentially fight two different wars.

Gian Gentile

No, I donâ€™t think they fight two different wars. That is the â€œbetter warâ€ argument these days, but I donâ€™t buy that, and I think most historians donâ€™t either. Clearly, they were very different in a lot of ways.

Gian Gentile

Westmoreland, I think, was very efficient, very proper, highly intelligent, a good organizer, a good manager, and I think up to aâ€”and I think a good leader. All these kind of attributes are obvious, which is why Westmoreland, I think, moved through the ranks and ends up in command in Vietnam in 1964.

Gian Gentile

I think Westmoreland ultimately fails in Vietnam, not because of his military strategy or his operational method, but because I think Westmoreland by â€™67 has a sense of where the war is at, but continues to push his operational method and military strategy, when I think deep down he knows it ainâ€™t going to work, and then heâ€™s at a point of just hoping it might. I think thatâ€™s really the flaw of Westmoreland and thatâ€™s what keeps him from stepping into the ranks of greatness is that he is just unable to do it. Although ironically, if he â€˜d done that, he probably would have been cast as the general who said this is the unwinnable war.

Weâ€™re Behind You Mr. President
Interviewer

Tell me, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution is really the starting point of the much greater commitment of American forces.

Gian Gentile

Yeah, I think the Gulf of Tonkin gives [President Lyndon B.] Johnson a mechanism to make the war seem like previous wars. Johnson, he always referred to Vietnam as â€œthat bitch of a war.â€ Classic Johnson, he was a rather vulgar, in your face kind of guy, kind of President. He did not see himself as a war President.

Interviewer

He was much more interested in the â€œGreat Society.â€

Gian Gentile

He wanted to fight a war, but he wanted to fight a war against American povertyâ€”he was a big daddy from Texas. He had a general concern for peopleâ€”he wanted to make peopleâ€™s lives better. This is one of the problems for political leaders in the Cold War is in order for Johnson to get things through Congress for his â€œGreat Society,â€ he has to have the political support of the right, and he cannot be seen as showing weakness against communism. So he thinks he needs to do something in Vietnam, he doesnâ€™t

want to be the President who loses Vietnam like Truman lost China.

Gian Gentile

So he feels like heâ€™s got to do somethingâ€”heâ€™s got his general on the ground saying weâ€™re seeing North Vietnamese regiments now, if we donâ€™t commit major American military power here, this government and this military will collapse, eventually. And Johnson doesnâ€™t want to be the one who has that happen to him.

Gian Gentile

So thatâ€™s the situation that Johnson is in, he knows heâ€™s getting ready to make a major military commitment beyond just advisors to Vietnam, but this is also Johnson who came of age during the World War II era. Youâ€™re going to fight a major war, but youâ€™ve got to have something to make it seem to the American people like itâ€™s a war.

Gian Gentile

With World War II it was easyâ€”you had Pearl Harbor and the Nazis. Even with Koreaâ€”you still had the North Korean attack into South Korea, what do you do with Vietnam? You need something to show aggression, to provide justification, so the Gulf of Tonkin gives that to Johnson.

Interviewer

And what really happened in the Gulf? What was claimed to have happened and what really happened?

Gian Gentile

The claim by Johnson is that there was an unprovoked attack by North Korean vessels against an American naval baseâ€”Iâ€™m sorry, North Vietnamese vessels against an American naval ship. There were actually two separate events that are rolled up into the same incident. The first event actually did happen, there was a North Vietnamese vessel that fired on an American naval vesselâ€”however, that American naval vessel was inside North Vietnamese waters. It wasnâ€™t a perfect unprovokedâ€”weâ€™re just out there trying to do our thing.

Interviewer

Was it in North Vietnamese [waters] in order to provoke it?

Gian Gentile

That I would have to check on that, I canâ€™t answer that.

Interviewer

So thatâ€™s the first.

Gian Gentile

Thatâ€™s the first. The second one isâ€”because it happened in North Vietnamese waters, you need another event to try to make it seem like something happened and thatâ€™s the one that actually didnâ€™t happen. Where there is a report of a North

Vietnamese vessel shooting on an American naval vessel, but it doesnâ€™t really happen, but the story is concocted that it did and that becomes sort of the justification, and the two events are actually rolled up into one.

Interviewer

This is a complete and utter lie? Fabrication in order to convince American people to go to war?

Gian Gentile

No, I think it was a careful construction of the truth. The first event did happen, the second one didnâ€™t, but theyâ€™re both sort of rolled up into one, and so there were elements in truth in saying that there was an incident in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Interviewer

But was it as cynical as letâ€™s turn this into our Pearl Harbor or was it a gross overreaction on the part of the Johnson administration to what happened truly into the Gulf of Tonkin?

Gian Gentile

It was a combination of both. Johnson wants a reasonâ€”he needs a rational for getting into the war. You take events, you shape, you construct them to cause them to look in a certain way and then there you have it. No, it wasnâ€™t a clear-cut case of outright North Vietnamese aggression.

Gian Gentile

But again, I think Johnson feels like he needs to have something that looks like North Korea. Itâ€™s an interesting comparison to George [W.] Bush in 2003. If youâ€™re going to take the country to war, youâ€™ve got to have something that looks like you were on the moral defensive as a matter of protection, that you were attacked.

Interviewer

That Bush overreacted, too, or he concocted again that same sort of parallel, sort of motivation, that historians will probably study for generations. But heâ€™s also got a lot of legislation before Congress at this time, too. As you say, he needs the support particularly [for] Civil Rights legislation.

Gian Gentile

Right. He needs the right, not just the Republicans, but you have the Democratic right in the south. Simplified, he needed the right to help get these programs through. At least in his thinking, if he appears to show weakness on Vietnam, if he doesnâ€™t do somethingâ€¦

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s important, though, to make that distinction. Cold War Democrats were pro-defense, right?

Gian Gentile

Oh sureâ€”absolutely.

Interviewer

Very much would have supported the war.

Gian Gentile

There was a consensus during the Cold War years, especially around defense issues. The problem that the Democrats have is the concern of appearance, of looking weak or appearing weak in the faceâ€”Johnson has on his mind the loss of China and what that did to Truman.

Interviewer

And explain that just briefly so that the viewers understand thisâ€”late â€™40s.

Gian Gentile

1949, Truman is the President, he isâ€”China, we can spend all day talking about China, but China had been in the throes of revolution, foreign occupation by the Japanese, and it all ended in 1949 with the Mao Communists overthrowing or defeating the nationalist armies of Chiang Kai-shek, forced them out of China. They were nationalists and Mao is very much communist. And so, in 1949 China goes communist and also in 1949 the Soviet Union explode their first atomic bomb.

Gian Gentile

All these things are happening very quickly. It wouldnâ€™t have mattered if there had been a Republicanâ€”it wouldnâ€™t have mattered if Dewey had been elected as President in 1948, China would still have been lost, it wasnâ€™t Americaâ€™s to own, to lose.

Interviewer

But this was also the time of the Red Scare, suspicions about the State Department, about Acheson, and the whole idea that somehow we were being accommodationists towards communists.

Gian Gentile

And you had to stand firm and all those kinds of things.

Interviewer

The notion of that phrase, â€œwho lost China,â€ rang for a good 15 years and what youâ€™re saying is Johnson heard this in the back of his mind as he is making the commitment to Vietnam.

Interviewer

Gulf of Tonkin is what, â€™64?

Gian Gentile

â€™64, right. November â€™64.

Interviewer

So it passes?

Gian Gentile

Overwhelminglyâ€”I think there was just one who voted against itâ€”or it was unanimous, it may have been unanimous.

Interviewer

It was not a declaration of war. Explain the distinction.

Gian Gentile

No, it was not. Well, a declaration of war, both houses [of Congress] would have to vote to declare war, and the United States would have been in a formal state of war against North Vietnam.

Interviewer

So what is it then if itâ€™s not a state of war?

Gian Gentile

Itâ€™s stuff [Laughter], itâ€™s the Gulf of Tonkin resolution that says, â€œWeâ€™re behind you Mr. President, do whatever you think you need to do to protect American interest and help the South Vietnamese stand up against communist aggressors.â€ Iâ€™m paraphrasing.

Interviewer

That is directly parallel to the fall of 2001 with the Congress granting the President the power to resist terrorist aggression.

Gian Gentile

It is very similar to 1990. Although there were votes againstâ€”whatever the resolution was right before the first Gulf War.

Interviewer

And a tremendous debate on it.

Gian Gentile

And a lot of debate. And there wasnâ€™t in the Gulf, itâ€™s there, itâ€™s unanimous, maybe one or two are against it.

Interviewer

If I remember correctly, that comparison was made to the Gulf of Tonkin by saying this time weâ€™re not going to do that, weâ€™re going to have a vigorous debate in Congress to determineâ€¦

Gian Gentile

They did, but they still didnâ€™t declare war. Declaring war has all kinds of implications.

Interviewer

So this is actually a Constitutional flaw. Itâ€™s kind of a gray area, right?

Gian Gentile

I donâ€™t know if itâ€™s a Constitutional flaw, itâ€™s how the Constitution is used nowâ€”this is its main point and limits of power.

The Impossibility of Total War
Interviewer

So, Gulf of Tonkin means that we now give the President the power to send enormous numbers of troops.

Gian Gentile

Within, relatively speaking, carte blanche, relatively speaking because he has to be careful. He doesnâ€™t want to call up the reserves, at least in a large significant way. Itâ€™s a tough situation for Johnsonâ€”heâ€™s got a lot of things on his mind. He needs the support of the American people because heâ€™s going to commit a substantial amount of American conventional military power to fight the war themselves against the communists in South Vietnam.

Gian Gentile

But he doesnâ€™t want to ask for a declaration of war because he is worried that maybe he might not get it, and the implications for that if he doesnâ€™t get it. It cuts in so many directions. He wants to fight a war vigorously, but he can only go so far. The real, real, real rub in all of this is the United States fights a limited war in South Vietnam, and the Vietnamese communists are fighting an unlimited war. There are no limits for the North Vietnamese communists or the South Vietnamese communists, no limits.

Interviewer

And tell me, the limits for the U.S. are you canâ€™t take the war to its natural conclusion because it would involve nuclear weapons.

Gian Gentile

Right.

Interviewer

You donâ€™t want to excite the aggression of the Soviet Union or China.

Gian Gentile

Right, which has very importantâ€”critical operational and military strategic effects for how the United States fights the War in Vietnamâ€”and for good reason. It makes sense for Johnson to say to his military, â€œI got it, I understand you want to go into North Vietnam, but you canâ€™t. Iâ€™ll let you bomb North Vietnam, but you cannot send ground forces into North Vietnam nor can you send ground forces into Laos to try to cut their supply lines.â€ Why?

Gian Gentile

Because in late 1950 [during the Korean War] when we had American ground military power close to the border of China, China did something, and we donâ€™t want China to do something to help the North Vietnamese if you American military go into North Vietnam. Because then, that could cause the Soviet Union to come in on the side of China, which they might, which might then bring about a nuclear war, which might screw things up in Europe. So the political restraints that Johnson places on American military in Vietnam has very clear and real affects on the military strategy and the operational methods.

Interviewer

And itâ€™s the same argument that Truman had made against MacArthur.

Gian Gentile

Absolutely, for good reason. Sure.

Interviewer

Itâ€™s this new world of unlimited warâ€"which is post-Second World War thinking that you canâ€™t take a war to its natural conclusions because the world has become too dangerous of a place.

Gian Gentile

Right. Vietnam is not worth a nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Nor is it worthâ€"even if it doesnâ€™t go nuclearâ€"nor is it worth fighting China in a major ground war because then where does it end? If youâ€™re fighting China and North Vietnam, tactically and operationally, you have to be able to attack their supply lines in China and if youâ€™re going to fight China in North Vietnam, youâ€™re going to need more than 500,000 troops on the ground, which is what you end up with in Vietnam.

Gian Gentile

Thereâ€™s also domestic constraints too. Johnson doesnâ€™t want to call up the reserves because that would require congressional support that might not be there, so thereâ€™s domestic constraints on Johnson as well.

Interviewer

Now there are hawks in the U.S. who wantâ€"LBJ just defeated [Barry] Goldwater in â€™64â€"who basically was saying the hell with limited wars.

Gian Gentile

Whether or not Goldwater, if he would have ever gotten elected would haveâ€¦

Interviewer

It was a defeated argument from the beginning, and because it was defeated, he felt the freedom to make it. But thereâ€™s other people, too, rightâ€"in the military, particularly?

Gian Gentile

Oh sure, the Air Force. Yeah, right. The Air Forceâ€"in a perfect worldâ€"the Air Force without any kindâ€"with any of the operational restraints and the theoretical approach that was forced on the Air Force by people like [Sec. of Defense Robert] McNamara and others,

this whole idea of bomb a little bit, increase the size of the forces on the ground, mix it up with the North Vietnamese Army, bloody their nose, weâ€™ll show them weâ€™re serious, and then theyâ€™ll go, â€œWhoa, they just sent us a signal, theyâ€™re serious, we better do what they want, and weâ€™ll stop.â€ Itâ€™s this theory of incrementalismâ€"that war becomes almost like a game of checkers or a bargaining match.

Interviewer

And this is McNamara?

Gian Gentile

This is McNamara and a number of others.

Interviewer

Weâ€™ll keep on raising the stakes.

Gian Gentile

Weâ€™ll start off with [Operation] Rolling Thunderâ€"weâ€™ll bomb just above the 27th parallel or the 17th parallel [above the border with South Vietnam], weâ€™ll bomb just above it. And then, if they donâ€™t give into our demands, and our demands are essentially â€˜stop what youâ€™re doing in South Vietnam, pull out your army and leave the south alone.â€™ If they donâ€™t do that, then weâ€™ll keep bombing them, weâ€™ll go a little bit farther, weâ€™ll increase the number of ground forces in South Vietnam. And at some point, theyâ€™ll get it that weâ€™re serious, and we mean business, and we can hurt them, and theyâ€™ll stop.

Interviewer

Now Roger Spiller said something I thought was interesting, he refers to McNamara forming this policy and thinking to himself, â€œWell, what would I do if I were in Ho Chi Minhâ€™s shoes?â€ Rather than saying, â€œWhat would I do if I were Ho Chi Minh?â€ That distinction led him to make some critical strategic mistakes because he didnâ€™t understand the dynamic present in Vietnam. Do you agree with that?

Gian Gentile

I think it was a failure to understand again that the Vietnamese communists, both north and south, were fighting a total unlimited war and that they were willing to do essentially anything to win. So then strategy really demands the serious, you know, look at questions of worth and interest, which again was why I think the war was unwinnable. The United States wasnâ€™t willing to confront that Vietnamese communist strategy and will and what it would have taken to defeat it. Since it wasnâ€™t willing to do that, it ended up taking sort of a half-baked approach and method, which becomes essentially an unwinnable, bankrupt strategy.

Interviewer

What Mcnamara is essentially saying is if I keep on raising the threat, youâ€™ll back down, and what Ho Chi Minh is saying is no matter how hard, how high you raise the threatâ€"

Gian Gentile

Right. And the United States, and we know this because the Vietnamese documents show this, the bombing of North Vietnam did hurt the Vietnamese.

Interviewer

It starts in what, â€™68?

Gian Gentile

It starts in â€™65 in Rolling Thunder. It is not a continuous bombing of major North Vietnamese cities. It starts off in the southern part of North Vietnam. Again, itâ€™s this whole idea of ratcheting up, ratcheting up. But relatively speaking, compared to like the closing months of World War II in the Pacific with the firebombing of the Japanese home islands, relatively few North Vietnamese civilians are killed during the bombing campaign, maybe 40,000 or 50,000, which again is not that much compared say, for example, World War II.

Gian Gentile

But the United States is not willing to do the kind of bombing that it did against the Japanese in World War II. And I think Ho Chi Minh understands this and how far the United States is willing to go. Theyâ€™re also paying very close attention to American politics, and I think they start to develop the sense that if they can hold out, if they can maintainâ€"which is not necessarily an automatic thing either for the Vietnamese communists, that ultimately they can prevail.

The High Water Mark
Interviewer

So â€™64 the Gulf of Tonkin, we begin ratcheting up the commitment, whatâ€™s the true commitment at its peak?

Gian Gentile

It starts in early March 1965 on top of the 15,000 or 20,000 some odd advisories, Air Force personnel that are there. It starts with a Marine regiment that is put into the Da Nang area to protect the air bases where this bombing campaign, Rolling Thunder, that just started, to protect them. That really is morphed into using the Marines and the follow-on American Army forces in active operations against the Vietnamese communists, both South Vietnamese communists and North Vietnamese communists.

Gian Gentile

And it reaches its peak by early 1965 of somewhere upwards of 525,000, of which, what maybe 400,000 or 380,000 are Army, 70,000 or 80,000 are Marines, 50,000 Air Force, something like that. And it expands in 1965. I think by the end of â€™65, the total force is probably 80,000. The end of â€™65 you already had Ia Drang with the 1st Cavalry Division. By the end of â€™66, itâ€™s upwards of 250,000. By the end of â€™67 now youâ€™re up to close to 450,000 to 500,000. Then you hit the Tet Offensive, and thereâ€™s a little bit more after that, but it reaches its peak by early 1969.

Interviewer

So take me through Westmorelandâ€™s leadership and the strategy that is executed during these years, leading right up to Tet.

Gian Gentile

Based on the political constraints that Johnson put on Westmoreland that you canâ€™t go into North Vietnam with ground forces, you canâ€™t go into Laos with ground forcesâ€”Westmoreland adopts a strategy of attrition which actually makes sense based on the political constraints that he was under.

Gian Gentile

Now maybe a better, more visionary general would have said and figured out what George Herring figured out in 1982 that the war was not winnable and that we can do this, but ultimately itâ€™s going to fail, and we need to come up with a different approach. Maybe that means telling the President, â€˜Sir, I can do this, but itâ€™s going to take a long, long time, itâ€™s not going to happen in two or three years.â€™ Westmoreland doesnâ€™t do that.

Gian Gentile

Westmoreland comes up with a strategy of attrition. Since he cannot defeat or annihilate the North Vietnamese Army through a short series of decisive battles, his strategy then is to fight the North Vietnamese Army and the South Vietnamese communist armies that are in South Vietnam in order to reduce them so much that they reach a level where they canâ€™t replace the number of people and equipment that they lose in fighting against the American military.

Gian Gentile

We called it a crossover point that the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese [communists] would reach a point, based on fighting against the Americans, that they just couldnâ€™t keep it up. It would be at that point, combined with the bombing of the north, that the North Vietnamese would say, â€œWeâ€™ve got to stop, we canâ€™t do this anymore, we quit.â€

Gian Gentile

It didnâ€™t work.

Interviewer

Do you think he really believed it or he was imagining it?

Gian Gentile

I think based on the political constraints that he was under in 1965, and understanding that heâ€™s not a visionary, great general that would have figured all of this out, it wasnâ€™t an unreasonable strategy to have in 1965. And again, what I said earlier, I think the tragedy and flaw of Westmoreland is that by â€™67, if he didnâ€™t know it, he should of, and if he did he should have been much more forthright than he was in explaining that this just ainâ€™t going to work. McNamara figures it out by the end of â€™66.

Interviewer

Explain to me thatâ€”what does the historical record now show us about what was going on inside the conference rooms?

Gian Gentile

This is HR McMasterâ€™s great book, Dereliction of Duty, and thatâ€™s why he says that there was a dereliction of duty that senior generals did know or they should of known that this wasnâ€™t going to work as the way they were carrying it out, but they just kind of all sat back and, for whatever reasons, they didnâ€™t have the intellectual courage, for bureaucratic interests, all sorts of reasons. They were like letâ€™s give this a shot and see if it will work. Youâ€™re racking up hundreds of Americans dead every week, not to mentions thousands and thousands of South Vietnamese.

Interviewer

When does McNamara realize this?

Gian Gentile

I think McNamara realizes it by the end of â€™66â€"probably, maybe even a little bit soonerâ€"he figures it out. Heâ€™s a businessman. It really is sort of a business model in fighting this war. If we can just keep taking them down, taking them down, taking them down, theyâ€™ll reach a point where theyâ€™ll just stop, and they wonâ€™t want to fight us anymore, but it doesnâ€™t work.

Gian Gentile

Now Westmoreland is criticized by a number of analysts, academics, former serving soldiers in Vietnam for not adopting the right operational method in Vietnamâ€"the Krepinevich Argument that comes out in the 1980s, that Westmoreland should have understood the true nature of the war, that it was war for the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people and use the American Military to pacify and control the South Vietnamese population, but that argument just doesnâ€™t work.

Gian Gentile

It doesnâ€™t work because Westmoreland has got a problemâ€" Westmoreland knows that the decisive element in the War in Vietnam is the South Vietnamese people and their allegiance to the government and establishing a legitimate functioning government in South Vietnam. Westmoreland gets itâ€"the documents show that. You read the stuff that he writes, he knows that, but he has a problem.

Gian Gentile

If he sends out the American military into the villages to pacify, to win hearts and minds, thereâ€™s still, by the end of 1965, early 1966, thereâ€™s probably close to 120,000 North Vietnamese regular infantry soldiers in South Vietnam in companies and battalions and regiments and divisions.

Gian Gentile

He had this dual threat. He has the conventional threat of the North Vietnamese Army and the South Vietnamese communist units, and he has also the insurgent threat, communist threat from the villages. The cards that were handed to Westmoreland in 1965, he played them as best as he could.

Tet, the Year of the Monkey
Interviewer

What was Tet and what happens as a result of [the] Tet [Offensive of 1968]?

Gian Gentile

I think Roger [Spiller] is right, for the United States, the Tet Offensive was the terminal campaign that essentially put the United States on a path of ending the war.

Interviewer

Explain exactly what happened.

Gian Gentile

It happens January 31, 1968. Tet is referred toâ€”itâ€™s the South Vietnamese Lunar New Year. Iâ€™m trying to figure out the easiest way to characterize it. Tet was the Vietnamese Communists, and it was a combination decision, although probably mostly put forward by the north to launch major attacks against the South Vietnamese government and its militaryâ€” that was its focus. The idea was that these attacks, carried out mostly by the South Vietnamese communist military forces, these attacksâ€”the aim behind it was that it would bring about hopefully a major uprising in the south. And that major uprising in the south would overthrow the South Vietnamese government and convince the United States that they could not win the war.

Gian Gentile

It was a very large scale and concentrated series of attacks by the majority of South Vietnamese communists, Viet Cong units, in South Vietnam that took place, at least the first part of the Tet Offensive, in January and February of 1968â€”it failed [militarily].

Interviewer

Supervised by the north or was it the south?

Gian Gentile

Yeah, probably planned and certainly resourced and directed by the north, but carried out by the South Vietnamese communist forces, in cooperation with the north. But it is the Viet Cong main force units and their militia units in the hamlets and villages that are largely carrying out these attacks against the South Vietnamese government and its military. It is the critical event of the war for the United States.

Interviewer

Why?

Gian Gentile

Because it is the act or it is the mechanism that brings the war for the United States to stalemate, militarily on the ground. The United States military reaches a point to where, after Tet, it canâ€™t lose because it didnâ€™t lose tactically. It didnâ€™t overthrow the South Vietnamese government. The ARVN did not break.

Gian Gentile

Tet showed that the American military couldnâ€™t lose on the ground, but it also showed that it couldnâ€™t win. So the United States military is in a stalemated situation in Vietnam. But really, the critical aspect of Tet is the effect that it has on the political and social climate in the United States because in some ways it is perhaps, at least in political

effects, itâ€™s probably one of the most decisive battles in history. Johnson says â€˜Iâ€™m not going to run for Presidentâ€™ within monthsâ€”a month later. Walter Cronkite, within weeks after Tet, goes on national TV and says, â€˜we are mired and stalemate in Vietnam or something to that effect.â€™

Gian Gentile

It has such a huge affect because just a few months before that in November of 1967, Westmoreland, the architect of the strategy of attrition of Vietnam is at the National Press Club in Washington D.C., where he gives the impression that there is light at the end of the tunnel, and he says something like, â€˜there comes a time when the end of the war comes into view.â€™

Gian Gentile

So Westmoreland is saying by the end of â€™67, weâ€™re winning, weâ€™re almost there, weâ€™re making progress, a couple more years, and weâ€™ll be able to turn this thing over to the south.

Interviewer

Do you think he believes it, what he is saying?

Gian Gentile

I donâ€™t know. Iâ€™d be interested to see what Lou Sorley has to say in his new biography that is coming out on Westmoreland. I havenâ€™t spent enough time in the Westmoreland documents to be able to answer that. I donâ€™t know. I think Westmoreland is an honorable man, he is a company man, and he is fighting the war the way his President wants him to fight the war. In essence, heâ€™s a good general, but heâ€™s not a great general. And greatness maybe would have demanded he step out of that box and not make that same speech at the National Press Club in November because thatâ€™s the backdrop to Tet; and the backdrop to Tet is Westmoreland and Johnson and otherâ€™s saying itâ€™s going okay, itâ€™s going okay.

Gian Gentile

Of course, thereâ€™s an undercurrent of reporting and assessments of the war by people like Neal Sheehan, Dave Halberstam, and others who are saying, no, things arenâ€™t really going at all the way you say they are.

Interviewer

Clearly by â€™71 when the Pentagon Papers are released, we know that in the Pentagon, people are saying this.

Gian Gentile

Right, sure. I mean [Daniel] Ellsberg starts to turn at around Tet, and even before, and so there is questioning, thatâ€™s what Iâ€™m saying, an undercurrent [of doubt]. We can look to the same kind of, howâ€™s the war going in Afghanistan? Itâ€™s hard, but itâ€™s not hopeless, weâ€™re in it to win, we won in Iraq, so we can win in Afghanistanâ€”weâ€™ve just got to figure out how to deal with this 18 month stuff, but we can make it work. Thereâ€™s also an undercurrent of criticism going on that is somewhat analogous to Vietnam in â€™68.

Gian Gentile

So Tet happens, and itâ€™s like, what? People are back in the United States going, wait a minute, we just heard three months ago that there is light at the end of the tunnel and that we were winning and if we were winning, how could they do that? How could they put together that kind of major offensive? This isnâ€™t really little pin-pricks, this is a major operational effort that takes months and months of planning and resourcing, and they carry it out. Itâ€™s defeated, but it is still carried out, so it has a huge political effect in the United States.

Interviewer

This is compared with a political challenge using [Eugene] McCarthyâ€™s announcement for President, rightâ€"heâ€™s anti-war. Robert Kennedy is about toâ€"I think after Johnson pulls outâ€"he announces, heâ€™s, I think, at that point already turning against the war. So you have political troubles at home for Johnson and then this emerges where it suggests that there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

Gian Gentile

Johnson has his classic statement of Iâ€™ve lost Cronkite, Iâ€™ve lost the war. And thatâ€™s when he says, â€˜Iâ€™m not going to run in March of â€™68.â€™

Interviewer

For those young viewers who donâ€™t know who Cronkite was, he was theâ€"

Gian Gentile

How would you characterize him today? Youâ€™re right, the media is so different. So, Lady Gaga? He was it. You and I watched Cronkite when we were kids on TV. Especially the Americanâ€™s psyche or attitude collectively towards war is still of the World War II mindset where the nation, the media, the people are supposed to be behind it, but none of that is playing itself out the way it did in World War II and now that weâ€™ve lost, Walter Cronkite is saying that we are mired in stalemate. What do we make of all this?

Interviewer

It ended being a kind of wise and moderate kind of voice. Also of that World War II generation, his lossâ€"itâ€™s like a grandfatherâ€™s loss.

Gian Gentile

Right, this is why Johnson says, Iâ€™ve lost Cronkiteâ€"Iâ€™ve lost the war.

Interviewer

Now how critical a difference is it that during the Vietnam War, we are maintaining a draft versus during our present campaign it is all volunteer Army in respect to both the execution of the military strategy and the political pressure that existed during a time a draft?

Gian Gentile

You could go a lot of ways with that. There is an argument today to reinstate the draft. A good friend of mine, Paul Yingling, has been making that argument in a sustained way. And there is something to it.

Gian Gentile

There was a definite linkage during the Vietnam War between their people and their political leaders and the fighting of the war. It was a moral commitment because the American people knew that their sons, then, potentially could fight and potentially could die. There were huge discrepancies in who fought and everything else, but still it was there and the draft was there, and it was a significant factor in American social and political life during the Vietnam War years, so there was a connection between the American people and the fighting of the war, a moral connection.

Gian Gentile

There is no moral connection, I think, between the American people today, except for the people in the American Military. There is no moral connection between the American people today and the fighting of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. That by itself, isolated, is an argument to reinstate the draftâ€"however, that runs in the face of all kinds of counterarguments. One has to do with military efficiency, is the draft Army what we really need for todayâ€™s and tomorrowâ€™s world? And the other question for today is the reinstatement of the draft even politically feasible? I donâ€™t think it is, I think itâ€™s a pipe dream.

Gian Gentile

I told Paul Yingling, I think youâ€™re just wasting effortâ€"itâ€™s not going to happen. Maybe the answer is not a draft, but an appetite suppressant by American military and political leaders on where we choose to send the American military.

Interviewer

To make this comparison back to Vietnam, that was such a crushing event because you had what American people thought was going to be a fairly quick war [in Vietnam] and suddenly theyâ€™re looking at sending more.

Gian Gentile

So now you have demonstrations, which arenâ€™t just student[s]â€¦Pete Maslowski, and I talked a lot about that. A significant part of it is happening on college campuses, but there is angst throughout American society, especially after Tet, about where the war is going and how to prosecute it. It comes at a time of the Civil Rights Movement, of change in the South. All these things areâ€"they all come to a point in 1968 where you have hundreds of thousands of people demonstrating in Chicago and Washington D.C. and other places around the country.

The Strategy Remains the Same
Interviewer

So you see, like Roger Spiller, that Tet was the turning point and then you have this question, as you raised it before, how do you end a war that youâ€™ve already lost?

Gian Gentile

Itâ€™s clear by the end of â€™68, even though Vietnamization doesnâ€™t really happen until Nixon takes overâ€"it is clear after the Tet Offensive by middle to late 1968 that the dynamics of the war, especially for the United States had changed.

Interviewer

McNamara resigns at this point? Westmoreland, is he?

Gian Gentile

McNamara resigns. Westmoreland is replaced by [General] Abrams in June 1968. Johnson is not running for reelection, and you have the summer campaign for the November â€™68 election of which Nixon of course wins. Nixon is sworn in January â€™69. Nixon knows that he has to get the United States out of the war.

Interviewer

He was the â€œanti-war candidateâ€ in some respects in the election. He is saying I have the solution.

Gian Gentile

I have a secret plan to end the war. Nixon would have slugged us in the face if we said youâ€™re anti-war. He says, â€˜Iâ€™m not one of those hippy, dirt bag, liberal sons of bitches, I hate war, but weâ€™ve got to end this war with honor.â€™ Weâ€™ve got to have this whole â€œpeace with honorâ€ thing. Nixon knows that he has to end the war.

Gian Gentile

Nixon in a lot of ways is very attuned to current American culture and current American politics, and he knows that he has to end the war. He has to get the United States out of Vietnam.

Gian Gentile

Actually, Nixon is fascinating, he and [Henry] Kissinger and how they work through all of this. Probably the first six months, Nixon actually thinks he can maybe win the war. Part of his thinking is he has a secret plan to end the war, heâ€™s going to get the United States out. Vietnamization probably really hasnâ€™t crystallized in â€™68 when heâ€™s running for President.

Interviewer

What was the secret plan? I thought it was Vietnamization.

Gian Gentile

It was, but deep down his secret plan was heâ€™s going to get in there, and heâ€™s going to let them have it. Heâ€™s not Johnson, and he watched what Eisenhower did in Korea when he kind of threw the nuke card around. Nixon really does internalize this notion of the mad man theory, that heâ€™s going to create this perception of unpredictability, and heâ€™s going to combine that with aggressive use of military force, especially airpower. It really is airpower, what he is relying on.

Interviewer

That mimics what Eisenhower did, right? Eisenhower always kept everything on the table, the inclination that if you read the materials, he never would have gone that final step [of using nuclear weapons]. He wanted that to be left open.

Gian Gentile

I donâ€™t think Nixon was ever seriously thinking of the nuclear card, but certainly the first six months, Nixon was thinking that an aggressive use of military power combined with the creation of the perception of him being unpredictable, sort of crazy man in the office, might be enough to show the North Vietnamese that we are serious. Thereâ€™s a whole different team in town, and the North Vietnamese are going to get serious about negotiations, and they will negotiate an end of the war favorable to us.

Gian Gentile

Which for Nixon, early on in his presidency, is North Vietnamese Army units leaving South Vietnam. Of course, that never ends up happening, and when the final peace treaty is signed between the two, significant numbers of North Vietnamese forces are still in South Vietnam.

Interviewer

Letâ€™s go back up to Abrams. Who is Abrams, how has he arrived to replace Westmoreland, why did Westmoreland leave?

Gian Gentile

Well Westmoreland wasâ€”letâ€™s see if its June ofâ€”he would have been four years in command [in Vietnam], so it was about time for him to leave. Although, if the war was going well, and Tet never happened, and there was light at the end of the tunnel, one could imagine a hypothetical where Westmoreland would have stayed easily for another year into 1969. Clearly, Tet had something to do with the removal of Westmoreland.

Gian Gentile

Heâ€™s brought back to be the Army Chief of Staff. People make the comparison to the recent change out between [George W.] Casey and [David] Petraeus where Casey [was replaced], some people call it a relief. Westmoreland wasnâ€™t relieved, but he was pulled out probably earlier than he might have been, and it was largely because of Tet, and how the war was going at that point. Abrams had been his deputy commander in Vietnam for at least a yearâ€”if not two years prior. So Abrams is Westmorelandâ€™s deputy. And he takes commandâ€”he is a war hero. Heâ€™s West Pointâ€”I think he is year group â€™39. I think he is three years behind Westmoreland.

Gian Gentile

Westmoreland isnâ€™t a nationally known figure at the end of World War II, Abrams is. Abrams 37th Tank Battalion of the 4th Armor Division of Pattonâ€™s 3rd Army is the spearhead that moves up and rescues the 102st Airborne at [the siege of] Bastogne. And it was Abramsâ€™s tank battalion that broke through the German lines and made the contact with the 101st Airborne and that becomes a huge story in the United States. Abrams is a nationally known, World War II hero. He doesnâ€™tâ€”

Interviewer

And Patton was his mentor in some ways.

Gian Gentile

Yeah, Iâ€™m not sure so much of theâ€¦Patton knew Abrams, and Patton reportedly

thought very highly of Abrams and reportedly had said things like, â€˜thereâ€™s only a few people who get it like I do, and Abrams is one of them.â€™ He was a first rate, highly competent tank commander in World War II that did hard fighting through Normandy and through France and into Germany.

Gian Gentile

He doesnâ€™t have combat leadership in Korea [the Korean War]â€”he is a Corps Chief of staff in Korea. He thenâ€”I canâ€™t remember the dates, but a lot of people have played up on this and tying some of his earlier experiences to the perceived success that some people think he had in Vietnam once he took command was that he was a division commander that sent units to either Alabama or Mississippi during the whole racial problem in â€™59 or â€™60 and handled the situation very shrewdly with a deft and, a careful application of precise military force, that didnâ€™t make things worse or things like that. Thatâ€™s often tied to Abrams and the perception that he actually did something different and was successful in Vietnam from â€™69 to â€™72. He takes over in â€™68.

Interviewer

Quite a few changes?

Gian Gentile

No, no. The argument would be that it does. He changes some wording of the strategies. The mission changes for Abrams. The mission for Westmoreland is to defeat the communists in South Vietnam in order to maintain the efficacy, or something like that, of the South Vietnamese government.

Gian Gentile

The mission for Abrams, after he takes over, becomes essentially one driven by Vietnamization that now the American militaryâ€™s mission is to get the South Vietnamese government and its military into a condition to where it can take on operations on its ownâ€”so the mission for Abrams changes. His focus becomes one of turning the war over to the [South] Vietnamese, but [with] the overall strategy and the application of American military forces, there is a shift in priority, but essentially the strategy remains the same.

Gian Gentile

He still has the same problem that Westmoreland does. Thereâ€™s still North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese communist regular forces, and there are still communist insurgent threats to villages and hamlets. Itâ€™s the same problem that Westmoreland has. Abrams does not fundamentally alter tactical and operational methods. He still relies heavily on firepower, just like Westmoreland did. Abrams often use to joke that the B-52â€™s was his strategic reserve.

Interviewer

What is Lewis Sorleyâ€™s argument, explain that?

Gian Gentile

His argument is the same as the Iraq surge triumph method that has been built around General Petraeus. Itâ€™s the same thingâ€”he is just changing names around. [The] American Army was stupid, bumbling, didnâ€™t get it except for a few exceptional units.

And in Vietnam, the exceptional units tended to be the Marines and their combined action programs. But by in large the American Army didnâ€™t fight the war correctly, was on the wrong track and then Abrams comes in and takes over. Almost immediately, within hours turns the American Army around on a dime, gets them focused in the right direction towards pacification, towards population security, does everything right, changes attitudes, gets the American Army on the right path.

Gian Gentile

And the Sorley Thesis goes so far as to say actually that the American Army and the South Vietnamese had won the war in the southâ€”had won. Thereâ€™s a chapter in Sorleyâ€™s book, Chapter 13 titled â€œVictory.â€ No, thatâ€™s not supported by the evidence from the Vietnamese side. Itâ€™s the argument that there was a better war, and General Abrams created it, he was a better general and because of those things, the war turned around. Same story with Iraq and the surge in 2007.

Interviewer

Same argument also is that there is more of a â€œhearts and mind approach.â€

Gian Gentile

Yeah, and itâ€™s just pure mythology. The American military under Abrams does notâ€”an operational focus does shift to supporting South Vietnamese government in military pacification efforts, but the operational and tactical methods of the American military during Abrams entire time there remains largely the same. There isnâ€™t a decided shift towards hearts and minds under Abrams. The American military is largely doing the same thing that they did under Abrams.

Interviewer

Under Westmoreland you mean.

Gian Gentile

Under Westmoreland, right. There are some tactical and operational changes, but thatâ€™s because the enemy changed what he was doing after Tet. Because the South Vietnamese communists, the Viet Cong, had been hurt so badly that they had to pull back and away from the villages in order to recuperate. And the communists change their strategy in late â€™69 and decide to essentially back off a little bit and refit and reset and reestablish the Vietnamese communists.

Gian Gentile

So that creates actually an opportunity for pacification programs and processes to go forward, which Abrams and the South Vietnamese government and military do capitalize on, but thereâ€™s still Vietnamese communists there, but the American military doesnâ€™t change its tactical and operational methods.

Interviewer

So you can argue that itâ€™s a factor of history rather than a factor ofâ€¦

Gian Gentile

Oh, absolutely. Itâ€™s historians going into certain documents or evidence and only using

those. I mean if you listen to or if you read the transcripts of the Abrams tapesâ€”Abrams and his staff believed that they had won the war. Thatâ€™s where the Better War Thesis comes from.

Interviewer

[Crosstalk]

Gian Gentile

It comes from Abrams. I think it comes from the historian Lewis Sorley, for years and years, sitting with headphones on, doing a very important service for historians by painstakingly transcribing, writing down the thousands and thousands of hours of tape recorded conversations that Abrams has with his staff and commanders on a weekly basis. Sorley has provided a huge, great asset for historians, but I think his argument is deeply flawed in that he gets the â€œbetter war thesisâ€ from Abrams and from listening to those tapes.

Gian Gentile

But if you juxtaposed that evidence against other evidence, especially from the [North] Vietnamese side, it becomes clear that the war was not won in the south, that the south had not become pacified, that 90 percent of the hamlet and villages had not become pacified as some American evaluations had said. In fact, the Viet Cong werenâ€™t dead, they were hurt, but they were still active, and they still maintained a moral link with the South Vietnamese people, especially in the countryside.

Interviewer

So you would say that Abrams faced the same issues that Westmoreland faced?

Gian Gentile

Absolutely. Changed, but still the same problem.

Interviewer

And he reacted essentially in the same way, a good general, but not a great general.

Gian Gentile

Yes, a good, competent general, but highly overrated. Westmoreland was a good, competent general and sadly has been pilloried and promoted as the single cause of failure for Vietnam, unfairly so. They were both good generals, and you can find good qualities in both and qualities that probably needed improvement in them too, but neither of them were great. Certainly Abrams was not a great general.

Gian Gentile

The story of Abrams being a great general is constructed. That story is more about the American Army after Vietnam than about the American Army during Vietnam.

DOCTRINES-R-US
Interviewer

Thatâ€™s my next questionâ€”the hangover or psychological impact of Vietnam and the wish to sort of rewrite the history in a way that says why we lost. They explain this to me as

there having been three sort of theses, is that right, about why we lost. One is that the politicians let us down, the other was it was a limited war we never got to fight, and the third was we actually had won. Explain those three in a little more detail. Who are the constituents that believe each of those?

Gian Gentile

Yeah this isâ€”it is a very conflicted set of explanations and interpretations for Vietnam, because itâ€™s also tied to an understanding by analysts, academic scholars, historians as to an assessment of if the war was winnable in the first place, if it was in American vital interests. It tends to work out that people who see the war as not winnable and not being an American vital interest, tend to not buy the whole notion that the war was won, in the end, by Abrams.

Gian Gentile

I do think it is a narrative thatâ€”it actually begins to be constructed by the American militaryâ€”even during the final years of the Vietnam War. If you read the weekly meetings by Abrams, you can see that narrative starting to be constructed by themselves. The idea that they were really making great progress in the South, things were finally starting to shape up, if we could just get those darn hippies to stop protesting and get the American people behind the war effort, if we can get these politicians on our side as we need them, we can make all of this work.

Gian Gentile

Again, the â€œbetter war thesisâ€ starts to be built by the American military in Vietnam, mainly Abrams, and then it is really developed after the Vietnam War in a way forâ€”and again you get into the whole development of arguments by Harry Summers that the war was winnable, the American Army just focused on the wrong enemy, it should have been the North Vietnamese and not the South Vietnamese communist insurgents.

Gian Gentile

Krepinevich turns that argument on its head. Both of them say that if the American Army would have done something different tactically and operationally, they could have won the war, which I think is a deeply flawed argument.

Gian Gentile

The war was unwinnable again based on what we were willing to commit morally and with regard to materiel.

Interviewer

Ok, before we turned on the camera, you and I talked about the fact that there were potentially three doctrines at work here, and they kind of frame the story of the Vietnam Warâ€”we had the Containment Doctrine that came from World War II and that informs the need to intervene in Vietnam. Then we have the Nixon Doctrine, which was the Vietnamization notion.

Gian Gentile

Actually, itâ€™s an acknowledgement that containment didnâ€™t work. At least American driven containment at the barrel of an American gun didnâ€™t work so now we go to the Nixon Doctrine, which is Vietnamization writ-large in other Asian countries. Weâ€™re

going to help and itâ€™s still about containment, but you guys got to do it and not us, because we tried and it didnâ€™t work so now weâ€™ve got to get out.

Interviewer

Now the post-Vietnam Doctrine really relating to the Reagan years and Casper Weinberger and Colin Powell.

Gian Gentile

[Lieutenant Colonel] Gail Yoshitani, she just finished her dissertation on the Weinberger Doctrine at Duke University for Alex Roland, and itâ€™s going to be published by Texas A&M press in a couple of months. She makes a very persuasive argument, an important argument to separate Weinberger from Powell.

Interviewer

Well letâ€™s get toâ€”[Crosstalk]

Gian Gentile

Because Weinberger is the one thatâ€”because I specifically, you noticed in my chapter I didnâ€™t sayâ€”there is a big difference between what Powell said.

Interviewer

Letâ€™s first go over Weinberger.

Gian Gentile

Weinberger, if you read his five or six or seven tests. The reason why I close with the Weinberger Doctrine in my essay is because I think the Weinberger Doctrine is an attempt to help America deal in terms of foreign policy and strategy with the trauma of Vietnam. The Vietnam Syndrome that comes out of Vietnam is we tried containment at the barrel of an American military gun, it didnâ€™t work, look what happened, 57,000 [American] dead, millions of South Vietnamese dead and displaced, millions more in Cambodia as a result of the war in Vietnam. Letâ€™s just not do anything like that ever, ever, ever again.

Interviewer

So Weinberger then says these are the things we need to do if we are going toâ€”

Gian Gentile

These are the tests. Actually, the tests I think are quite reasonable.

Interviewer

What are they?

Gian Gentile

I need Gailâ€™s dissertation here. I can paraphrase them, do your best to ensure that you will have a reasonable amount of American support, commitment of American forcesâ€”the amount of American military force that you commit should be commensurate or linked to the interest thatâ€™s at stake. And that for me, as a matter of strategy, is one of the essential tests that Weinberger put forward.

Gian Gentile

This relationship between the types, the effort of military that youâ€™re going to use should be linked to the objective that youâ€™re seeking. Which I think, just as an aside, we are currently out of whack with Afghanistan today.

Gian Gentile

And that there should be defined, clear objectives. Those are essentially three or four of his tests. But I do think they provideâ€”I think Gail Yoshitani is rightâ€”Weinberger is misunderstood, it was not a framework to limit American involvement in the world, even at times with the use of military force, it was a way to create a framework to figure out how to use in a wise and appropriate way, American military force in the world to get after American interest[s], which is why I ended the essay on Vietnam with that.

Interviewer

And what has that distinguished from the Powell Doctrine?

Gian Gentile

The Powell Doctrine was, I think, always more pernicious and harmful for proper American civil military relations. The Powell Doctrine is a careful construction of a military voice that directs or tells our political masters how and when to use us. Thatâ€™s not the way it works.

Gian Gentile

The Powell Doctrine is a construction of a military voice saying, hereâ€™s how the American military should be used. No, the way it works in our democracy is itâ€™s the political leaders that say, this is what we want to do with you. We want you to go into Darfur to do this. Itâ€™s then incumbent on the American military in the realm of strategy to say this is what itâ€™s going to take to accomplish the political objectives that youâ€™re giving us.

Interviewer

Was Powell an overreaction, then, in some respects? [Crosstalk]

Gian Gentile

Yeah but maybe an overreaction in a way that didnâ€™t fix the problem. Then you have a military supercharged with the Powell Doctrine thatâ€™s dangerously approaching militarism and saying â€˜well, you canâ€™t use this for that, weâ€™re only for this.â€™ No, thatâ€™s not the way it works. The President says go do this, thatâ€™s exactly what weâ€™ll do.

The Big Lesson
Interviewer

In closing, what is the big lesson of the end of the war in Vietnam?

Gian Gentile

Figure out when youâ€™re in a war thatâ€™s not winnable based on the way that

youâ€™re fighting it and end it as quickly and least costly as possible. 20,000 American dead from â€™69 to â€™72, thatâ€™s a substantial amount.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s the real costâ€”

Gian Gentile

Itâ€™s the cost. Wars are fought, people die. Militaries fight wars, soldiers/service members die. Itâ€™s not just that. All of that is a significant part of it, but itâ€™s all the other commitment of national blood and treasure. Also I think with Vietnam it is also the ongoing and continuing bloodshed and destruction that occurred in the place itself. When you look at it all in hindsight, you have to ask this question of worth and was the war worth that kind of commitment and that kind of effort, which I think has very applicable insights towards Afghanistan today.

Interviewer

Well and you can argue I guess, and this is your point, it even perverts the understanding of how we should use force and where in the world and therefore still rings into the ears of those making policy decisions now.

Gian Gentile

Yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s a disturbing impact, which could multiply the cost.

Gian Gentile

Right, which is also tied to the whole narrative that comes out of Vietnam, that the war was winnable, there was a better war, that bad strategy and policy could be rescued by better tactics and operations. Weâ€™ve embraced that so much that all we have now in Afghanistan is tactics and operations. If we have a strategy itâ€™s bankrupt, because the Presidentâ€™s political objectives are actually quite limited, but weâ€™re pursuing a maximalist approach of nation building in Afghanistan to achieve these limited political objectives.

Interviewer

Well that leadsâ€”this is sort of off-topic, but fascinating to hear you say this. Is there something odd, or some kind of dissonance, between a President waging a war that he did not initially commit to? And whereâ€™s the moral pinning there, is it possible to conduct a war under those circumstances?

Gian Gentile

Well, Eisenhower did in Korea. He didnâ€™t start the Korean War, but it came to be his when he was President.

Interviewer

But he wasnâ€™t a firm critic of it, was he?

Gian Gentile

No, Obama wasnâ€™t a critic of Afghanistan.

Interviewer

But he was a critic of Iraq.

Gian Gentile

He was a critic of Iraq. I donâ€™t know where all this leads. It was fascinating, the last couple of weeks with the relief of General McChrystal and his replacement with General Petraeus. Who knows where the Presidentâ€™s head is at?

Gian Gentile

Charlie Rose had Michael Gordon and Daveâ€¦, and a number of others on a couple of weeks ago, and they were all of the mind that the President now, by putting General Petraeus in there, is firmly behind the whole nation building counter-insurgency approach in Afghanistan. The contradiction to it, though, is he has placed an 18 month time frame on it though, which I donâ€™t know, time will tellâ€¦.

Interviewer

Which Petraeus says, paradoxically, he is OK with.

Gian Gentile

He says, but he, along with Secretary Gates and a number of others, as soon as the President made the 18 month statement, there was lots of qualifications, like â€˜itâ€™s the start, it will be conditions based.â€™ This is a real tough one, because time and resources are essential elements of questions of strategy. How long do you want to commit to something like that?

Interviewer

Well, thank you.

Gian Gentile
Alright, thanks.