

**Hennessy, Michael A. Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997.**

**Anthony James Joes**

Volume 19, Number 1, Spring 1999

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs19\\_01br06](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs19_01br06)

[See table of contents](#)

**Publisher(s)**

The University of New Brunswick

**ISSN**

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

**Cite this review**

Joes, A. J. (1999). Review of [Hennessy, Michael A. Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 19(1), 169–170.

**Hennessy, Michael A.** *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972.* Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997.

Michael Hennessy, an assistant professor of history at the Royal Military College of Canada, here presents a worthwhile study of the US Marines in the Viet Nam conflict, based on a useful bibliography. He focuses on the period of most intense American commitment to the war, 1965-71, and on perhaps the conflict's most dangerous area, the notorious I Corps, the provinces immediately south of the grotesquely misnamed Demilitarized Zone, where the Marines had their concentration. His main purpose is a "comparison between thought and deed." The book's principal conclusion is unsurprising but significant: "In both theory and practice American strategy failed to adjust to the dilemmas posed by the dual conventional and guerrilla threats in Viet Nam." (both from the Preface)

The Marines tried to apply to Viet Nam valuable lessons they had learned in the Caribbean and Central America in the 1920s and 1930s. These lessons were distilled in the Marines' 1940 *Small Wars Manual*, which is still a most valuable volume because its ideas were both valid and well-understood. In essence, the standard procedure of the Marines in those tropical assignments (mainly Nicaragua and Haiti) was to establish an enclave and within it to set up and train a local militia. The Marines would eventually hand control over to this militia and move on.

During this conflict in Viet Nam, General Victor Krulak, commander of the Marines in the Pacific area, understood that if American forces could provide security to the villages, this would deprive the larger enemy units of food, recruits, intelligence and taxes, and thus cause them eventually to wither. He also knew that village security has meaning only if the security forces will remain in the village. Hence Marines took on more and more responsibility for maintaining small units in the villages of I Corps (out of which grew the famous Combined Action Platoons- CAPs). The Marines' war became one of small skirmishes and counterterrorism, against the will of the Army brass and the US Embassy. "Marine Corps commanders found themselves in a constant struggle between the common sense of the half-forgotten old doctrine [the 1940 *Manual*] and the dictates of the new Army doctrine." (p. 24)

Rather than security for the villages - which was where most Vietnamese lived - the Johnson administration placed its hopes for diminishing support for the VC success on economic development. It was the War on Poverty transferred to Southeast Asia. It apparently occurred to few within the Beltway in those days that Vietnamese peasants might aid VC because of simple physical fear.

Hennessy emphasizes, however, that village security could never have been the whole war. "No strategy that rested on the assumption that North Viet Nam's role in the war was primarily supportive, rather than dominant . . . would likely have succeeded." (p. 182) That is, village security efforts needed to be protected from main-force VC and regular NVA attacks. General Westmoreland's big-unit war was therefore necessary as a shield for pacification. The US Army, however, did not confine its actions to spoiling

operations; instead it waged the big-unit war as an end in itself, a war of attrition. Given the Johnson administration's geographical restrictions on US actions, such a war could have relatively little lasting effect except to wear out American opinion at home. But increased emphasis on the big-unit war did mean a decreased role for the Marines in pacification. By 1971, pacification was at last receiving the attention it deserved, but by then the US was preparing to write off South Viet Nam. Thus the 85,000 Marines in country in 1969 had fallen to 500 by mid-1971.

On the eve of the great Tet Offensive, 470,000 US troops were in Viet Nam; of these, only 74,000 were in combat-maneuver battalions. Lyndon Johnson, arguably the worst war leader in US history, sent an army vast in size but still too small to do the job and hedged about with all sorts of political limitations, to pursue questionable tactics in support of an inadequate strategy, in a country whose real importance to US security was quite unclear, under the scrutiny of sensationalist and increasingly hostile news media manipulated by NVA agents.

That is how it came to pass that by 1972, with nearly one-third of the South Vietnamese population participating part time or full time in security forces of one kind or another (p. 153), with the war having become the conventional type in which US air power would be at its most effective, with a stable government in Saigon and every sign indicating that the communists did not have the support of anything approaching a majority of the population - in these most propitious circumstances of the entire conflict, the US abandoned its allies to their fate.

Anthony James Joes  
Saint Joseph's University