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THE OVERLOOKED IRREGULAR WARFARE EXPERT THE PENTAGON SHOULD STUDY TODAY

Nathaniel L. Moir | 01.31.23



In his 1961 book about warfare in Southeast Asia, *Street Without Joy*, Bernard Fall, the Howard University professor and former French Resistance fighter, explained, "A dead Special Forces sergeant is not spontaneously replaced by his own social environment. A dead revolutionary usually is." Fall's point was that military capabilities and technologies are important but insufficient when complex politics and long-standing

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grievances motivate diverse populations to engage in conflict. Through dozens of articles and seven books, including *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis*, published in 1963, and *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu*, published in 1966, Fall explained why France, the United States, and their allies in the Republic of Vietnam had such difficulty countering Vietnamese revolutionary warfare.

The problem the West and its anticommunist allies encountered was an inability to connect military outcomes with often conflicting and shifting political goals. In addition, the network of political organizations that Vietnamese communists created—through an administrative structure Fall called **parallel hierarchies**—was impossible to counter with military capability alone. These networks, ranging from village-level to large inter-zone regional command elements, thwarted superior military power wielded by the United States and the Republic of Vietnam. Motivation, when it intersected with Maoist-inspired political organization, enabled the Viet Minh and subsequent generations of Vietnamese communists to outlast French and American forces over almost three decades between 1946 and 1975.

The key to the insurgents' success was irregular warfare, described by Fall as Vietnamese revolutionary warfare, an approach that hinged on more nuanced, precise, and context-dependent policy than that of conventionally minded adversaries. Given the US military's **recent prioritization of large-scale combat operations**, Fall's thoughts about a similar prioritization of conventional warfare in Vietnam seem prescient. Today, US policymakers would do well to study Fall's insights, or they risk repeating the mistakes of the past.

An Irregular Education: Targeting Collaborators in World War II France

Fall was well equipped to identify and describe connections between guerrilla warfare and political

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outcomes. Born in Vienna in 1926 to a Jewish family, Fall emigrated to France in 1938 after the Anschluss of Austria. When he was seventeen, Fall joined the Resistance after his mother was deported to Auschwitz and the Gestapo murdered his father. Confronted with the possibility of elimination or conscription for labor, Fall joined several Zionist resistance groups in southern France before landing in the Maquis in Haute-Savoie. During his time in the Resistance, his unit targeted collaborators to undermine Nazi and Vichy authority. Fall later explained how targeting collaborators and assassinating key local leaders isolated occupation forces from the population. Fall's analysis of warfare in Vietnam is filled with analogies and anecdotes related to his early experiences in the French Resistance. He later moved from the Maquis to the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur, subsequently receiving more formal military experience after D-Day as a mortar platoon leader in the French Army's 4th Moroccan Mountain Division.

After the war, Fall used his French, German, and English proficiency to work as a translator during the early stages of the Nuremberg trials in 1946. In 1947 and 1948, he continued to work for the War Crimes Commission, analyzing the Krupp manufacturing corporation's widespread use of slave labor to fabricate materials used in Nazi armaments, especially tanks, artillery, and U-boats. In 1952, Fall moved to the United States as one of the first International Fulbright Scholars, earning a master's degree in political science at Syracuse University. In 1953, he travelled to Indochina for ten months of research on the Viet Minh, gathering material to complete his doctorate in 1955.

Fall subsequently worked for the Special Operations Research Office, established in April 1956, and the Human Relations Area Files, then located at American University. In 1958, Fall joined the faculty at Howard University as a professor of international relations where he worked with such scholars as Ralph Bunche and taught students, including a young Stokely

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Carmichael, a future key figure in the Black Panther Party. When US involvement in Southeast Asia began escalating in the 1950s, Fall's experience and scholarship positioned him as one of the foremost authorities on Vietnamese revolutionary warfare. Well before the intervention reached its apex, journalists David Halberstam and Walter Cronkite and military officers, such as Major General William Yarborough, turned to Fall for his expertise.

A Formula for Revolutionary Warfare in Indochina

Fall's study of Maoist thought along with French military officers who commanded in Indochina, including Colonels Gabriel Bonnet and Charles Lacheroy, inspired his conception of revolutionary warfare. Fall described the influence of other French officers, including Commandant Jean Hogard and Colonel Roger Trinquier, in the introduction to Trinquier's *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*. Many of these officers contributed to the French journal *Revue militaire d'information*, which was an essential source of information for Fall and provided a basis for his investigation of the critical components of revolutionary warfare. At a time when it was rare to consider Vietnamese sources, Fall also studied and assessed how anti-colonialist thought permeated the nationalism propagated by Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chau Trinh. These two nationalists laid the groundwork on which communist leaders, such as Ho Chi Minh, Le Duan, and Truong Chinh, built the communist-controlled revolution. Fall's holistic approach to studying the war ultimately integrated political economy, including regional rice production, criticism of US foreign assistance before 1961, and studies of Vietnamese society and religion.

In an article published in *Naval War College Review* in April 1965, Fall described revolutionary warfare (RW) through a formula: $RW = G + P$ in which guerrilla warfare (G) and politics (P) were variables. While guerrilla

warfare emphasized tactics, politics comprised diverse subfactors, including information and propaganda, ideology, diplomacy, economics, and others. In the article's first section, "The Century of 'Small Wars,'" he explained, "This formula for revolutionary warfare is the result of the application of guerrilla methods to the furtherance of an ideology or a political system. This is the *real* difference between partisan warfare, guerrilla warfare, and everything else." Fall's central goal was to delineate the relationship between political action and violence. Through efforts to establish what he described as "a competitive system of control over the population," he pointed out how any "sound revolutionary warfare operator" historically prioritized political action: "The political, administrative, ideological aspect is the primary aspect. Everybody, of course, by definition, will seek a military solution to the insurgency problem, whereas by its very nature, the insurgency problem is militarily only in a secondary sense, and politically, ideologically, and administratively in a primary sense."

Revolutionary warfare, therefore, was an accumulation of psychological, political, and ideological factors, driving tactical, operational, and strategic decision-making. In what was Fall's most precise description, he explained, "I would like to put it in even a simpler way: When a country is being subverted it is not being outfought; it is being out-administered. Subversion is literally administration with a minus sign in front." To implement such as system, Fall was adamant that revolutionary warfare fighters seek "primarily to *establish a rival regime via the system of hiérarchies parallèles.*" Ultimately, he believed this political and structural administrative system of parallel hierarchies—a shadow system of governance—characterized the type of warfare the United States encountered in Vietnam. Writing in his book *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* in 1963, he explained why recognizing this system of warfare mattered:

Thus, I believe that the whole problem of the meaning of “war” in the new context will have to be re-examined sooner or later, to take into account the facts that parallel hierarchies, revolutionary warfare, and active sanctuaries are here to stay and that our present response of concentrating on the external military symptoms of the problem simply has no bearing on the preponderant politico-socio-economic components.

When US involvement escalated, committed irregular warfare practitioners began to acknowledge the value of Fall's scholarship. Yarborough, then commandant of the Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, personally invited Fall to speak with Special Forces soldiers preparing to deploy to Vietnam in the early 1960s. According to the base newspaper, *The Paraglide*, Yarborough introduced Fall as “one of few acknowledged experts on Vietnam.” US Army special warfare courses, including “Problems of Development and Internal Defense” and “Counterinsurgency in Indochina,” relied heavily on Fall's writings. High-ranking politicians also turned to Fall. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright often met with Fall and would later describe how Fall's scholarship shaped his views on Vietnamese history and Sino-Vietnamese communist relations in *The Arrogance of Power*. In an important respect, Fall shaped Fulbright's disagreements with President Lyndon B. Johnson's war policies, and this political dissent culminated in the televised Vietnam hearings in 1966.

A Guide for Irregular Warfare Today

Even as early as 1961, Fall believed that “‘international vandalism’ in the form of Revolutionary War is going to be with us for a long time to come.” To address this problem, it was best to “quit inventing new names and slogans for it, and settle down to study its rules.” As a

framework for those rules, he emphasized the importance of studying the context of political legitimacy and how military arms might achieve political goals. Escalating military operations in contexts where adequate popular support and competent allied leaders did not exist was folly. In a contemporary contrast with American experiences propping up weakly supported central governments, Eugene Linden recently noted of US support for Ukrainian resistance, “Unlike the U.S.’s experience with corrupt, incompetent allies during the Cuban revolution, as well as in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the U.S. now has a secret weapon on its side—the righteous fervor of the people it is trying to help.” Despite genuine anticommunist Vietnamese allies who fought and died for a free and independent South Vietnam, a series of corrupt and incompetent administrations in the Republic of Vietnam could not unite the South Vietnamese in a manner similar to the way Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has united Ukrainians with their government while justifying large-scale American and NATO support.

In the case of Vietnam, Fall wanted decision makers to understand that military might could not counter the social-political and historical drivers of Vietnamese revolutionary warfare. Excessive military force could not compensate for American and allied lack of political will to fight and would be counterproductive. Willpower, in this sense, is not ambiguous and involves critical mental and moral underpinnings. According to a 2019 RAND study, there is a pattern of failed campaigns that reflect “the wavering emphasis on the will to fight in military doctrine.” During the Vietnam War, domestic dissent tied to civil rights, the draft, and other problems connected to US policies demonstrated damage inflicted within the United States that undermined its military might abroad. Importantly, Fall was adamant that democratic values should remain central to military and policy planning, writing in 1965 that “what America should want to prove in Vietnam is that the Free World is ‘better,’ *not* that it can kill people more efficiently. If

we would induce 100,000 Viet Cong to surrender to our side because our offers of social reform are better than those of the other side's, *that* would be victory." Social reform is not possible in every intervention, but military action without political solutions is unlikely to provide desirable results.

Finally, Fall's writing evokes the difficulty in conducting irregular warfare when it is viewed as competing with and not fully integrated into conventional operations. In Vietnam, despite the efforts of Navy SEALs, the joint special operations task force MACV-SOG, and the 5th Special Forces Group, integrating irregular warfare with large-scale combat operations was challenging. Similar problems exist today. Despite an increased emphasis on large-scale combat operations, "the most likely form of conflict that Army forces are going to conduct based on the historical record, is irregular warfare." The Irregular Warfare Annex to the 2018 National Defense Strategy perhaps did not go far enough in articulating a US approach to irregular warfare. As David Ucko has explained, the annex is "inadequate in the face of the challenge at hand. . . . This competition for legitimacy and influence is fundamentally what irregular warfare is all about and, for this reason, the annex—while very welcome and important—is also insufficient for the reform and change that must now take place." Regrettably, Ucko's 2020 comments remain just as relevant today.



Fall's ideas on political warfare remain relevant today, as David Kilcullen and Greg Mills demonstrate in *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan*. Afghanistan, like Vietnam, "reminds us of the primacy of politics in war, a lesson that should be noted by outsiders to any conflict." This is what Fall wanted policymakers to understand before they escalated military intervention in Vietnam. He recognized the primacy of political

legitimacy over military force and noted the tendency to over-rely on military power, writing presciently in 1963: “To win the military battle but lose the political war could become the US fate in Vietnam.” Fall believed that no invading force could possess sufficient military power to compensate for its political standing if that force lacked political legitimacy among the society it sought to control. Relying on politically legitimate partners, then as now, remains central to this task.

Tragically, Fall died in February 1967 when he was forty years old after he tripped a landmine while on patrol with US Marines in Thua Thien province, near Hue, Vietnam. His life experiences and insights into irregular warfare in the twentieth century provide much to consider, particularly as it relates to efforts to establish political legitimacy when military force is involved. Revisiting Fall’s papers and his many books will remind readers why political action remains the foundation for whatever form warfare takes.

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Image: Bernard Fall with US soldiers in Vietnam, (credit: US Army, via Wikimedia Commons)



1 COMMENT



B.C. on 01.31.23 at 11:55 am

a. Bernard Fall, it would seem, studied "revolutionary war" from the perspective of (a) native populations (b) trying to overthrow and replace the status quo political, economic, social and/or value systems — imposed earlier — by foreign colonial masters. (These being Bernard Fall's "mid-20th Century" revolutionary wars?) Whereas:

b. Today, it would seem, we must study "revolutionary war" more from the perspective of (a) foreign (neo-colonial?) masters (b) trying to overthrow and replace the status quo political, economic, social and/or value systems — developed earlier — by various native populations.

As to this such latter suggestion, consider the following:

“Politically, in many cases today, the counter-insurgent (the U.S./the West and its partner governments) represents revolutionary change, while the insurgent fights to preserve the status quo of ungoverned spaces, or to repel an occupier – a political relationship opposite to that envisaged in classical counter-insurgency. Pakistan’s campaign in Waziristan since 2003 exemplifies this. The enemy includes al-Qaeda-linked extremists and Taliban, but also local tribesmen fighting to preserve their traditional culture against twenty-first-century encroachment. The problem of weaning these fighters away from extremist sponsors, while simultaneously supporting modernisation, does somewhat resemble pacification in traditional counter-insurgency. But it also echoes colonial campaigns, and includes entirely new elements arising from the effects of globalisation.” (Item in parenthesis above is mine. See David Kilcullen’s “Counterinsurgency Redux.”)

“Dhofar, El Salvador and the Philippines are all campaigns driven by fundamentally conservative concerns. When we are looking to Syria right now, (however,) it is not just about maintaining order or even the regime, but about larger political change. In Afghanistan and Iraq too, we represented revolutionary change. So, perhaps we should read Mao and Che Guevara instead of Thompson in order to find the appropriate lessons of how to achieve large-scale societal change through limited means? That is what we are after, in the end. And in this coming era, where we are pivoting away from large-scale interventions and state-building projects, but not from our fairly grand political ambitions, it may be worth exploring how insurgents do more with little; how they approach irregular warfare, and reach their objectives indirectly.” (Item in parenthesis above is mine. See the Small Wars Journal article “Learning From Today’s Crisis of Counterinsurgency” — an interview by Octavian Manea of Dr. David H. Ucko and Dr. Robert Egnell.)

“Since the 1990s the focus of American international security policy has been focused on creating conditions for

extending zones of security and prosperity to other states under the theory that 'political as well as economic globalization would make the world safer — and more profitable — for the United States.' Consequently, the United States saw expansion, rather than retraction, of American military presence around the world." (See the 2016 edition of the book "Exporting Security: International Engagement, Security Cooperation, and the Changing Face of the US Military" by U.S. Naval War College Professor Derek S. Reveron; therein, see the bottom of Page 2 of the Introduction chapter.)

"Athens as America: Contemporary America is often now seen through the lens of ancient Athens, both as a center of culture and as an unpredictable imperial power that can arbitrarily impose democracy on friends and enemies alike. Thomas Paine long ago spelled this natural affinity out: 'What Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude.' Like ancient Athenians, present-day Americans are often said to believe that 'they can be opposed in nothing,' and abroad can 'equally achieve what was easy and what was hard.' Although Americans offer the world a radically egalitarian popular culture and, more recently, in a very Athenian mood, have sought to remove oligarchs and impose democracy — in Grenada, Panama, Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq — enemies, allies, and neutrals alike are not so impressed. They understandably fear American power and intentions while our successive governments, in the manner of confident and proud Athenians, assure them of our morality and selflessness. Military power and idealism about bringing perceived civilization to others are a prescription for frequent conflict in any age — and no ancient state made war more often than did fifth-century imperial Athens." (See the first chapter of Victor Hanson's book "A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and the Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War.")

Bottom Line Thought — Based on the Above:

From the perspective that I provide here, it would seem that we should not study Bernard Fall today (very different

era and, thus, very different "revolutionaries" — [a] back in Fall's time — as [b] compared to today.)

Rather — given the comparison of (a) the U.S./the West's (neo-colonial?) campaigns today to (b) the colonial campaigns of much earlier times (ex: see the end of Kilcullen's quoted above) — maybe we should study the likes of C.E. Callwell, below, instead?:

“Small wars are a heritage of extended empire, a certain epilogue to encroachments into lands beyond the confines of existing civilization and this has been so from the early ages to the present time. The great nation which seeks expansion in remote quarters of the globe must accept the consequences. Small wars dog the footsteps of ‘the pioneers of civilization’ in the regions afar off.” (The quotes around ‘the pioneers of civilization’ above are mine. See Chapter II — “the Causes of Small Wars” — in C.E. Callwell’s book “Small Wars: Their Principles and Practices.”)

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