

Could We Have Won the War?

-by Stanley Karnow

The same question arises in every discussion of the Vietnam experience: Could we have won the war? My answer is simple: The war was unwinnable.

The United States went into Southeast Asia with a huge arsenal – artillery, aircraft and the latest technological devices. At the height of the war, in late 1967, more than 500,000 American troops were involved. Our strategy was to break the will of the communists, and compel them to withdraw to North Vietnam – and we defeated them in every battle. But it was all futile.

What we did not understand was that we were up against an enemy willing to take unlimited losses. So, even though we killed them by the thousands, they would not surrender. It is estimated that at least one million communist soldiers died in the war. Compare Vietnam's population to ours, and it's as if we lost four million men. We believed that, with our overwhelming firepower, we could wear them down – but just the opposite occurred. By their tenacity and perseverance, they wore down the American public – so that, after years without progress, we felt that we had to withdraw.

General William C. Westmoreland, the U.S. commander, maintained that the communists accepted heavy casualties because Asians regard life as cheap. That comment showed a failure to understand the Vietnamese, their history and what makes them tick. They have been struggling against foreign invaders for 2,000 years – Chinese, Cambodians, French and Japanese. As a result, they became intensely nationalist – and would make extraordinary sacrifices to defend their homeland.

On a visit to Hanoi not long ago, I interviewed General Vo Ngyuen Giap, the commander of the communist forces. “How long were you prepared to go on fighting?” I asked him, to which he responded, “10, 20, 50, 100 years, as long as it took to win –

