



## The bogging down of Western armies: a perspective 1/3

BRENNUS 4.0

le chef de bataillon Guillaume Lasconjarias, du pôle études et prospective du CDEC

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**In October 1964, while President Johnson's advisers were considering the modalities that led to the inexorable increase in the number of campaigns. In October 1964, as President Johnson's advisers pondered how the war effort in Vietnam could be inexorably expanded, Under Secretary of State George Ball wrote a memorandum that ended with these prophetic words: "Once on the tiger's back, we're not sure where we're going to get off."<sup>1</sup>**

**Recent operations by Western armed forces, by America and its allies, in Iraq and Afghanistan, seem to have been struck by the same curse: a rapid start, with a demonstration of military and technological power that leads to undeniable successes, before continuing with an increasingly long campaign, without any notable gains and with to The result is a growing human and material cost, which worries political decision-makers and gives media influencers the opportunity to question the relevance of the initial commitment.**

Nathalie Guibert sums up the process at work: "It always takes short wars to satisfy a versatile opinion. The French always support the "opexes" at their launch, and then follow most of them without enthusiasm out of the corner of their eyes in a kind of fatalistic indifference (...). After a few weeks, the press always headlines: "Enlissement".<sup>2</sup>

There seems to be some discussion here: bogging down is an action that sees an object, a vehicle, a person stop and then sink into a soft material. In military history, the analogy with the period beginning in late November 1914, when the Allied and German armies, exhausted by the "Race to the Top", were in the midst of the "Race to the Bottom", has been used to describe the "bogging down". Sea" and unable to unblock, buried themselves in the trenches for more than three years. From now on, and until the return to the war of movement in the spring of 1918, it is the victory of the Glébe. A priori, the conflicts of the second half of the 20th century no longer corresponded to these modalities, but mutatis mutandis, the bogging down turned into a strategic aporia: from

now on, after a first rapid and successful phase, armies and first of all land forces manage to fulfil the first part of their mission and then exhaust themselves in hunting down an adversary who vanishes but uses new asymmetrical modes of action.

Victory seems elusive, as does rapid disengagement, when the minimum conditions of security and stability are not met.

Also, from the beginning of the American engagement in Afghanistan, at the end of 2001, then during the months following the Second Gulf War and the invasion of the United States, the press was always in the headlines after a few weeks: 'Stalemate'. Iraq in 2003, the terms 'mission creep' (involuntary extension of the mission) or 'quagmire' (quagmire) appeared alongside broader questions about the notion of victory. In other words, the bogging down would illustrate as much "the impotence of power" which, in the words of Bertrand Badier<sup>3</sup> sees States whose main regalian instrument, the monopoly of legitimate violence, is unable to respond to its missions, either because they are beyond its reach or, more fundamentally, because they do not meet its catalogue of uses.

Let us, however, disregard the term "bogging down": it is less a military concept than a facility that underlines a sense of impatience on the part of commentators who hope, wait, sigh at the lack of measurable and concrete results. The problem is therefore very topical and involves a series of questions: how long does it take to get bogged down? A month, a year, ten years? The United States was in Vietnam from 1955 to 1973<sup>4</sup> and have been in Afghanistan since the end of 2001, making it the longest war in their military history... Who judges the validity of such an assertion? The military itself? The political decision-makers? The media? What solutions are finally being proposed? And are they effective?

The bogging down is the result of three major problems: a strategy that evolves over the course of the mission without taking into account the diplomatic, political or socio-economic environment; a response that is always limited and late; and the importance of perceptions and understanding of the issues.

### **The "thin red line": military engagement through the prism of political and diplomatic choices**

To understand the bogging down is to question the reasons for the military engagement: the gap between the objectives defined by the political power and their achievement gives the (wrong) impression of a lack of progress. It is therefore important to ask the question of the desired end state and its pursuit in order to gauge the achievement of the objectives pursued.

A textbook case, Vietnam provides an example of an uncontrollable escalation: started at low noise under Kennedy, the aim was then to support the regime of the Republic of South Vietnam in the face of the Vietcong guerrilla. The strategy was then orchestrated by two advisors to the President, General Maxwell Taylor, former Chief of Staff of the Army, who had advocated an army of "the people" to support the regime of South Vietnam in the face of the Viet Cong guerrillas. The strategy was orchestrated by two advisors to the president: General Maxwell Taylor, former Chief of Staff of the Army, who had advocated a land army capable of conducting 'limited wars', and Walt Rostow, an academic who considered it essential to combine economic modernisation and the use of force against the communist elements introduced into the country.<sup>5</sup> Based on the

principles of counter-insurgency, the strategy appears to be working, as evidenced by the reports given to McNamara, the Secretary of State for Defence. However, during the year 1963, the bad news multiplied: the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) was curbed during the battle of Ap Bac<sup>6</sup> While President Diem's government is facing a social and religious sling that leads to his overthrow in favor of a group of generals.

Despite these warnings, Americans remain confident: McNamara recommends a first withdrawal of the military advisors at the end of October, and judges that everything will be completed by the summer of 1965...<sup>7</sup> He needs a tour of the area, in December 1963, to realize that the situation is in fact catastrophic:

" The counter-insurgency strategy had failed: The Viet Cong was relentlessly attacking "strategic hamlets", destroying most of them and extending its influence. The South Vietnamese ally was on the verge of collapse, with no stable political leadership and no effective army".<sup>8</sup> 1964 thus saw a turning point with measures that, taken independently, responded to the challenges, but together led to a slow but inexorable escalation. Two events explain it: the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August gave President Lyndon B. Johnson the authority to take all necessary measures without consulting Congress (Gulf of Tonkin resolution), which presided over the war, while the victory of the same Johnson in the November elections reinforces his legitimacy.

From then on, the Americans are going in three complementary directions:

- 1) to exert constant pressure on the communist government in Hanoi to force it to stop supporting the Vietcong south of the 17th parallel and to accept a peace process,
- 2) to supervise, train and support the ARVN by giving it the military means necessary to eventually take over its security and defence in an autonomous manner ("Vietnamization"),
- 3) in the meantime, to increase the number of troops and to deploy more and more ground forces to guarantee the protection of the South Vietnamese ally: 'It was no longer just a matter of giving advice to the South Vietnamese Army; American battalions were going to fight: search for the enemy by exploiting the assets of air mobility, deny him cover by spreading defoliants, secure him once contact was made, then destroy him with combined firepower...The United States was taking a decisive step, even though troops were restricted in the use of force: Fighting would take place only in South Vietnam, and there was no question of invading the North or attacking guerrilla bases in Laos or Cambodia. (...) Optimism officially prevailed. When Robert McNamara pre-published the budget for the following year, in December 1965, he downplayed the expected costs of the war; he allocated \$10 billion instead of the \$20 billion needed, as if the conflict was to be limited, short and victorious. »<sup>9</sup>

Three years later, in late December 1967, in a memorandum to the president, McNamara admitted that no goals had been achieved: "The war in Vietnam has a momentum of its own that must be stopped. A significant increase in US troop deployments, attacks in the North, or actions in Laos and Cambodia are not the answer. The enemy can absorb or counter them, bogging us down further and risking an even more serious escalation of the war."<sup>10</sup> He ends his recommendations with a terrible observation, seeing that none of the options he suggests has a chance of "winning the war militarily", which leads him to be "only able to This means that he can only "avoid a general conflagration" and put in place a sound military-political/pacification-diplomatic package that will move the lines towards success in the years to come. We cannot hope for more. »<sup>11</sup>

1) George W. Ball, Memorandum: How Valid Are the Assumptions Underlying Out Vietnam Policy , 5 October 1964, in "A Light That Failed , " TheAtlantic Monthly, July 1972, pp. 33-49.

2) Nathalie Guibert, Qui c'est le chef , Paris, Robert Laffont, 2018, p. 92.

3) Bertrand Badie, L'impuissance de la puissance: Essai sur les nouvelles relations internationales, Paris, Fayard, 2004.

4) Although war was never officially declared, it can be considered to have begun after November 1, 1955 (formation of the first group of American military advisors) until the departure of the troops after the Paris Agreements in 1973. The fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975 corresponds to the evacuation of the US Embassy.

5) Jean-Philippe Baulon, "Les trois guerres de Robert McNamara au Viêt-Nam (1961 - 1968) et les ornements de la raison dans un conflit irrégulier", Stratégique, 2009/1, p. 425-444.

6) The battle of Ap Bac on the Mekong plain in January 1963 saw ARVN forces trample on a position held by Vietnamese forces. Cong forces that inflicted a severe blow before breaking away (David M. Toczec, The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam. They Did Everything but Learn from It, Westport CT, Greenwood Press, 2001).

7) Neil Sheehan (ed.), The Pentagon Papers. The Complete and Unabridged Series as Published by the New York Times, New York, Bantam Books, 1971, pp. 210-213.

8) Jean-Philippe Baulon, quoted, p. 432. 9) Ibidem, p. 436.

9) Ibidem, p. 436.

10) Emphasis added.

11) Robert McNamara, Draft Memorandum From Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Johnson ("Future actions in Vietnam "), Washington, May 19, 1967.

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**Title :** le chef de bataillon Guillaume Lasconjarias, du pôle études et prospective du CDEC

**Author (s) :** le chef de bataillon Guillaume Lasconjarias, du pôle études et prospective du CDEC

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