

**STRATEGY TO ACHIEVE ACCOUNTING OBJECTIVES**  
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History is littered with strategic and planning failures, from ancient times to recent times. Books have been written on the flawed strategies in diplomacy, war and domestic policy. Man is not perfect.

But there are lessons to be learned from histories about the causes of such failures. They include a misreading of the geopolitical situation, bureaucratic incompetence, egos, intelligence failures, inexperience, lack of public diplomacy, lack of public support, lack of interagency coordination, politics, groupthink, individual ambition, inexperienced leaders, fear of critics and rejection of non-government ideas, regardless of their merit/source, and fear of contradicting a bureaucratic superior. Recent events at our southern borders and in Afghanistan illustrate the dangers of flawed strategies which potentially will have long term negative effects on the POW/MIA issue if Vietnam views the event as strategic unreliability of the United States.. (On a personal note, one of my NSC duties was refugees. For over seven years, I spent part of my time dealing with resettlement of Indochina refugees from neighboring countries and negotiations for the release of re-education inmates in Vietnam.)

Some of these failures can be found in POW/MIA policies and plans. Because it is a functional issue, off the radar for many, the failures are not as conspicuous as national policy missteps that lead to negative national consequences. But the effects on the families are consequential and reduce confidence over time in the veteran community and a significant number of concerned citizen and committed congressional personnel.

Along with many others, I have noted these missteps in my League speeches each year from 1982-2019. Reviewing my remarks in preparation for this paper, vice an oral presentation this year, I felt I was developing a case of the hives.

Concerning strategy, in consultation with the League and approved by the POW/MIA Interagency Group, I was the author of the original 10-part strategy in the early 1980s. I laid it out publicly to the League in June, 1984. It consisted of 1) High level statements to signal the Vietnamese, Lao and the US bureaucracy that change was here; 2) Close and continuing cooperation with the League; 3) Active public diplomacy; 4) A bipartisan approach; 5) A diplomatic approach on a humanitarian basis that would allow terms of reference that would not compromise our strategic interests; 6) Raise intelligence priorities, to include upgrading the DIA POW/MIA branch in rank, number of personnel, budget increases, collection plans re-written, refugee screening upgraded, and enhanced coordination among intelligence agencies.

(On the intelligence side, we had our first Special National Intelligence Evaluation (SNIE) which provided our initial baseline expectations of Vietnamese knowledge. On the collection side, we had a woefully understaffed JCRC team and, in 1986, added DIA's Stony Beach specialists to interview refugees throughout Southeast Asia and in the United States after resettlement. We were essentially following bread crumbs that led us to larger pieces and,

over time, enabled us to use this knowledge with other intelligence information resulting in negotiations at the policy level to produce some full loaves. This was recognition that intelligence is not simply the accumulation of facts, but recognition of what is important and what to do with it.)

7) Coordination with other governments and NGOs, soliciting their help and intervention with Laos and Vietnam; 8) Enhance media relations through backgrounders, public presentations and policy papers; 9) Discourage private irresponsible activities and correct misinformation; and 10) Set incentives for direct negotiations with both Vietnam and Laos.

All of the initiatives were backed by the President, the National Security Advisors, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and enthusiastically endorsed by the existing demoralized bureaucracy, the families and the major Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs). This initial strategy, which held reasonably intact until 1992, resulted in more accounting for Americans than any other period. Since the first joint crash site excavation in 1985, the admission by Vietnam of a significant number of remains in storage, and the repatriation of more than previously or since. There have been dramatic increases in accountability in Laos, as well, along with other significant advances.

For a variety of reasons common to the list of past strategic failures, the original strategy began to unravel. As circumstances change, is it logical to make strategic adjustments to enhance the mission but, unfortunately, many of the changes were detrimental, though obvious to the League, current and former government officials and veterans' groups, but continued to be pursued by the government. Despite the obvious, many in leadership ignored the problems and tried to defend the increasingly obvious flaws. Clearly, some were not "knitting with two needles."

A few, but certainly not all, of these errors included abolishment of the Interagency Group, moves to isolate the League from policy consultations, manpower reductions in research and analysis personnel, and moving intelligence analysts from DIA to DPMO; acceptance of Vietnamese assertions, without verification; absence of high level policy statements emphasizing the priority of the issue; erosion of the normalization roadmap by ignoring the initial POW/MIA criteria; assertions that Vietnam was fully cooperating in good faith; public diplomacy morphed into public affairs to convince all of good work and progress, vice needed signals to the Vietnamese; equating remains fragments turned over that were unidentifiable as accounting numbers, a politicized SNIE produced to back up new policy; reduction of intelligence priorities; Stony Beach isolated, moved, criticized and their product ignored; small effective low level consultations became large affairs without intimate, effective negotiations and simply reinforced field operations; a new DPMO director (much to my chagrin, I recommended) began on a positive note then launched into one of the most destructive runs in the history of the mission by isolating the issue from broader policy, falsely reported failures as great successes; excluded US Ambassadors and Congress from consultations; initiated self-promotional annual reports; attempted to isolate the League from the issue, even searched for a legal basis to separate the League's annual meeting from annual government briefings that broke trust built over more than a decade; downgraded the US-Russia Commission from a presidential commission to one headed by himself which was reciprocated by downgrading on the Russian side; and destroyed the 4-party talks that

isolated Laos and Cambodia to the benefit of Vietnam. One expects lies, distortion and manipulation from an adversary, but not from American officials.

In addition to the above erosions, the geopolitical and domestic environments were changing which provided both opportunities and policy dangers. The original strategy had been designed to make progress despite the Cold War with the Soviets and the traditional attempts by Vietnam to balance great power competition. But, Vietnam was coming to grips with the end of the Cold War and the increasing PRC hostility towards them. Thus, in an attempt at balance, using the US developed, along with initial efforts to open their economy. Their greater cooperation in field operations and reduced rhetoric on US policy provided additional opportunities, some not exploited due to the obvious bureaucratic failures on our side.

Also affecting and blunting the opportunity came from national policy that began to downplay the importance of the accounting issue in US-VN relations, as policy attention shifted to a Cambodian settlement. Voices were heard from Congress, State, VSOs and the business community that Vietnamese cooperation in a Cambodian settlement was so important that downplaying flaws on POW/MIA cooperation was essential.

A critical element was the amateur hour in the business community. Some larger companies were realistic about the opportunities. However, some consultants, lobbyists and business groups initiated a totally irrational message in the 1990s that Vietnam's minimal reformist measures had resulted in the image of a new Asian tiger which, in reality, was barely a new born cub. As reality set in and hundreds of millions of dollars had been wasted, it took almost two decades for Vietnam to show economic vitality that warranted investment.

I was even offered some lucrative opportunities by business interests which I promptly rejected and wrote or co-wrote editorials, with TV appearances and conferences. I emphasized that any moves at that time were premature and eroded POW/MIA policy. However, this push aligned with ideological leftists in America and accelerated moves toward political and economic concessions to Hanoi. They were premature and eroded the principled criteria in the original "roadmap" established for measuring Vietnam's cooperation on the POW/MIA issue. Since they had acquired their larger objectives, we were fortunate that Vietnam didn't simply pull back. They maintained successful field operations, but new initiatives as seen in the past to increase the pace and scope faded, while the bureaucracy continued to praise Vietnam's efforts despite knowing more could be done.

Over the past four decades of League meetings, I have pointed out much of the above as it developed and simultaneously praised good new initiatives. In a couple of my presentations, I urged a strategy review, since it was obvious there was an absence of an overall strategy and an almost sole focus on operations and meetings. That need is still obvious today. We have the opportunity now to recognize that culture always moves faster than government, as the bureaucracy can confuse activity with achievement and can create a war with common sense, while citing good intentions with the defense of flawed policy.

I have inadequately summarized the past strategic policy successes and failures, while not providing adequate recognition of the scores of dedicated professionals at JCRC, CIL, JTF-FA, JPAC, DPMO, DPAA and Stony Beach who recognized the policy blunders affecting the issue. They persevered at pointing out the errors and bravely made unheralded below-the-

horizon adjustments on their own to minimize the damage being done. Many of their recommendations were ignored and some finally gave up, remained silent or retired after being isolated by uninformed leaders. Scores of these personnel are known to many of us who had previously served or consulted with them. It should also be noted we have been encouraged from time to time by new personnel at the POW/MIA policy and operations level who recognized the problems and made great strides to make adjustments. Unfortunately, many were eroded or reversed by subsequent appointees.

At present, it appears to be an opportune time for a comprehensive review of strategy and policy to see if initiatives could be developed that would heal the bureaucratic wounds and identify policy approaches to the Vietnamese, Lao and Cambodian governments to define a framework to ensure we can reach the fullest possible accounting. The current geopolitical environment is favorable with Vietnam; public private partnerships are showing greater promise; unilateral Vietnamese field capabilities are showing enhanced viability; the newly launched intelligence review is focused on areas where updated information is needed and should be a major asset in strategy development. The COVID slowdown should provide some quiet time to think about the past and future. Now is the time to spend a productive hour, thinking about the problem for 55 minutes and 5 minutes thinking about solutions.

When I assumed my duties on the NSC staff and began working on strategy, one of the first tasks was to inform myself about the past. I knew the missteps in the Carter Administration, having observed the failed commissions from my cubicle in the Pentagon and my previous year as a Foreign Area Officer, or FAO, in Southeast Asia, but only the Presidential libraries could give me insight on what preceded this period. I tasked a CIA officer to visit all of the libraries and produce a summary for my use along with innumerable key documents. Knowing the past was invaluable in discerning a possible productive future. I found that the further I looked into the past, the further I could see into the future. I could not have written a coherent effective strategy without knowing what preceded my tenure, nor can current officials who would undertake a strategic review. All of the past failures by strategists provide insights on causes. I have outlined them generally and provided specific successes and failures in the POW/MIA effort which I hoped would be helpful.

Should a review be launched, it should be quiet and professional. Public hype will simply raise expectations that great breakthroughs or write-offs will result, none of which would be true. The reviews should begin in DPAA with DIA participation. After the initial effort with no final conclusions, interagency coordination should begin soliciting views and ideas from State, DoD policy level, the League, public partners and responsible veterans. Some measure of success should be defined as correcting government mistakes, as well as developing initiatives to present to the Vietnamese, Lao, or Cambodians.

Part of the internal challenges that can cause dysfunction center on the tension between operations and policy and was well known for over two decades. It is a truism that policy must lead operations, and policy personnel must learn from operations, but overall plans and policy must be centered in DPAA Headquarters. To be effective, however, they need more research and analysis personnel at Headquarters focused on policy, vice operations, whose focus must be on the valuable tactical insights from operations that should be provided regularly to the research/analysis and policy/plans personnel at all levels. Overall, knowledge is more important than rank or status, and acquiring and sharing the knowledge is mission

essential at all levels. The strength of purpose comes from conviction inside and knowing the issue.

An evaluation of the external strategy should include a baseline matrix regarding the following:

- What is the country doing now?
- What do we want them to do in the future?
- What are we doing to have them take action on our requests?
- Who is responsible for getting it done?

These basic questions should open up thinking to consider what leverage we have in a geopolitical context. Have we followed previous requests, such as the League's comprehensive proposal, *Concept for the Future*, coordinated in advance by DPAA and provided to Vietnam in 2018, without known follow-up? The proposal provided a ready vehicle to exploit in developing strategy.

Hopefully, Afghan developments do not further shake faith in American commitments, as happened after our evacuation in Vietnam. That shook relations with our Southeast Asian friends for years. The PRC has begun to exploit the Afghan situation to cast doubt on US staying power. A signal by the Administration of our desire to enlist Vietnam further into a strategic relationship with the US, vice the PRC, seems prudent.

In developing a strategy, some historical tests need to be kept in mind to maximize effectiveness. First is clarity on objectives and approach; second is intensive engagement at the policy level (interagency and DPAA); third is identifying how to apply leverage; and fourth is a strategy endorsed and publicly supported at the highest levels.

While I have been involved in aspects of this issue for over 40 years. I would not presume to write a new strategy at this time. I can hopefully use my experience in and out of government and sustained contact with ranking officials in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia over the years to provide useful background to current officials in revising strategy in what appears to be an opportune time.

My extensive review of the past had been both painful and insightful in preparation for this paper, but has brought forward some specific recommendations that should be included in a renewed strategy.

1)The current joint DPAA/DIA effort to review the knowledge base is a critical baseline component and should be of more value in strategy development than a national SNIE if it focuses on information gaps that can motivate the development of initiatives, bilateral and unilateral, to close the gaps and contribute to evaluating current approaches. Additional steps need to include closer coordination with DIA and a stronger push to support the integration of Stony Beach into overall strategy.

- 2) Some of the obvious gaps were identified in the League comprehensive proposal provided to the Vietnamese and need to be reviewed with the aim of developing proposals to the Vietnamese to address these gaps with both bilateral and unilateral aspects.
- 3) Public diplomacy has eroded badly over the past 20 years and has been confused with public awareness and internal efforts to complement government programs. Public diplomacy should be directed at objective reporting of host nation cooperation as well as failures. This relates to maximizing leverage and is complementary to geopolitical leverage and aspirations.
- 4) There exists a serious shortage of research and analysis personnel in DPAA headquarters needed to provide reliable input to policy-makers. They have been depleted badly as Research and Analysis (RA) was shifted to operational priorities and the foolish rush to meet the arbitrary goal of 200 IDs per year declared by some in Congress, now understood to be 300+. Given the emphasis on WWII and Korea to reach this numerical goal, scores of historians were hired that put RA for Vietnam War in a secondary role. The mandate demanded a Mortuary Affairs response with and by the Services in the lead, since it was primarily disinterment efforts from US cemeteries, backed by Lab identification skills. DPAA's role should have been restricted to battle sites in areas not previously investigated, such as New Guinea, Korea, Burma, etc. A shift in responsibility should be explored which could provide enhanced funding for genuine POW/MIA investigation and recovery efforts.
- 5) Re-energize the interagency priority. Beginning with the abolishment of the IAG and the formation of DPAA, many in other positions of the government including State and DoD policy felt they could become less active in the issue since the message being received from DPAA was "We've got this now." The issue began to disappear from high-level speeches, congressional testimony and press engagements which sent erroneous signals to Vietnam that we believed cooperation was superb, with no real need for new initiatives. There were many, in and out of government, who never believed a reorganization in DoD without continuous interagency priority was a solution. This included several ambassadors who continue to do yeoman's work. State/DoD/NSC emphasis on the importance of continued priority in their respective roles in contacts with Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia is an essential ingredient to success. DPAA needs to provide them with a menu of messages that they can use, with periodic updates. They also need to stress the importance of feedback to DPAA on reactions to messages.
- 6) Re-establish the productive partnership with the National League of Families. The League is the only family organization dedicated to the POW/MIA issue from the Vietnam War. Their record since formation in 1970 is clear, and they have been proven correct on the issues for decades. They have always attempted to work in tandem with the government, recognizing they and the government are part of a single garment of destiny—both succeed or both fail. Unfortunately, this publicly announced partnership rooted in the 1980s began to fray and was almost destroyed in subsequent periods. Some leadership took League critiques as personal attacks and ordered a shutdown of communications and sorely needed consultations. Through directives to staff, unnecessary protective markings, such as FOUO or pre-decisional papers, communications with the League were cut off, attempts to separate the League Annual Meeting from government updates were made, and more. While serious staff continued off-the-record consultations, the League stepped up policy level interface with DoD

and State while increasing their dialogue with host governments. The result was greater isolation of DPAA from the issue and real damage. Disassociation from the League, the only private organization of family members proven serious over the decades, makes DoD look foolish, isolating themselves from multiple players in the US and foreign governments.

A cursory review of League history including their multiple trips to the region, their skillful passage of messages to our government from high level officials in counterpart governments, their decades of unbroken pursuit of this issue which provides a continuity unavailable to our government makes them a leader in the whole concept of private-public partnership that needs to be strengthened to achieve ultimate success. A person with an argument can't match a person with experience, so use the experience and consult with the League vice unproductive arguments and attempts to isolate them.

7) Re-emphasize the stated mission of achieving the fullest possible accounting for a live man, his remains, or convincing evidence why neither is possible. This salient, clear mission is a national obligation. The POW/MIA issue is not a legacy issue, but stems from violations of the Geneva Convention by our opponents and creates our sacred obligation. The concept of humanitarian aid to our former opponents is laudable and began in the 1980's, but was not obligatory. This line has been in danger of being blurred by government and NGOs dumping the issue into the legacy bucket, a trend welcomed by Vietnam as mandating an obligation in return for POW/MIA cooperation. While we have come far, and while I do not believe Vietnam would set up a formal quid pro quo, recent public statements by Vietnam repeating the words of American architects of the latest humanitarian initiative that their war dead in Vietnam or in areas where they operated are "Vietnamese Missing in Action" or VMIA, is a warning flag of regression to erroneous language dropped decades ago.

Some of the above recommended areas for attention in a strategy review descend from the original strategy, others have become salient due to the progress we have made that revealed new information and unanswered questions. There are other areas that currently assigned personnel could helpfully add, and they should be encouraged to do so. Addressing many of them may be a challenge to the existing bureaucracy, and the greatest danger to progress in implementation will stem from bureaucratic "groupthink." A 1977 definition from my files is applicable, as follows

*"There are numerous indications pointing to the development of group norms that bolster morale at the expense of critical thinking. One of the most common norms appears to be that of remaining loyal to the group by sticking with the policies to which the group had already committed itself even when those policies are obviously working out badly and have unintended consequence that disturb the conscience of each member."*

It exists today and it will be critical to control as a policy review and implementation take place. As noted earlier, we have a few leaders in both operations and policy positions who are caring, competent, and made significant progress. The current Director of DPAA, Kelly McKeague, is one of them. He is dedicated to the mission, a talented negotiator, has committed to stay and, unlike some of his predecessors, has genuine empathy for the families of those still missing and unaccounted for. He is joined by a cadre of talented professionals from field operations to headquarters staff in Washington and Hawaii, and a leading forensic lab of scientists and staff.

Unfortunately, among the more talented, knowledgeable and dedicated, the greater their frustration and dissatisfaction has arisen with current policy or organization, or both. Feeling unable to have their concerns addressed due to bureaucratic groupthink, many of their concerns spread laterally and outside of DPAA. This is a management challenge for the DPAA Director that only he, certainly not I, is capable of addressing. In the context of beginning a policy review, consideration should be given to opening a dissent channel, like the one established at State that provides an opportunity for the staff to express policy concerns. This could be coupled with a chance for employees to provide their own ideas to improve current approaches or introduce new ideas. Now, many feel that if they want a heart-to-heart session, they are directed to go through proper channels which is a non-starter, crushes morale and sends talented personnel back to pound on their desks.

A final caution....when I was in Washington, we learned quickly that if we wanted consensus, we did not have lawyers at the table. Protecting the client is their first priority, not protecting the policy. As a policy-maker, if a legal view is needed, the message to the lawyer should be "This is what we need; as part of the team, find a legal way to do it."

So, instead of a boring speech this year, hopefully my efforts in writing won't be completely ignored, but will stimulate thinking in the existing environment with its challenges, such as current budget cuts and the potential hesitation of strategic cooperation in Southeast Asia due to the Afghan disaster and COVID. But opportunities are also present that can build on recognition by Vietnam that the POW/MIA issue was their "bridge to normalization," as was their commitment to achieve the fullest possible accounting. A comprehensive policy review would be timely and welcome to best move the issue more rapidly to successful completion.