

Due date: Saturday, 30 October 2010, 09:05 PM

Last edited: Saturday, 30 October 2010, 08:59 PM (855 words)

In sports, everyone loves the underdogs. The word "upset" sends chills down a sports enthusiast's spine. Teams that are completely overmatched, in every category, should not be able to win or even compete. But for some reason it happens, proving that being better in every way that can be recorded doesn't guarantee victory. These rare victories are won with intangibles. In the sport world, intangibles are factors that can't be easily observed or measured. While reading section three of the book Patriots: the Vietnam War remembered, I am reminded of these underdog stories that I grew up watching. The American army had just about every military advantage imaginable over the North Vietnamese, including technology, funding, training, weapons and numbers. On paper most would predict a blow out, but somehow it wasn't. The Vietnamese somehow were able to go toe to toe with a much superior force and compete. What help even the tables were the intangible advantages that the Viet Cong held.

It seems like the US army relied on technology and tactics that turned out to be counterproductive in many situations. Some of their strengths became weaknesses and some of the Vietnamese weakness became their biggest strengths. The Viet Cong knew that there was no way they could survive a war of attrition with the Americans so they had to become creative. Using mostly guerilla tactics and a dedicated support force helped them overcome some of their short comings. In the assigned reading I noticed a couple sections that I felt told of both sides' advantages.

The section titled "Trails to war" describes the paths of soldiers from both armies to the battlefield. The contrast in the two journeys is revealing. The typical American soldiers were flown in by commercial airlines in air conditioned cabins. They were heading into an unknown land to fight an unknown enemy, unaware of the severity of the conditions that awaited them. The war was far from being a personal matter for the Americans, most of them had no idea where they were going and who they were fighting with.

For the Vietnamese, it was the exact opposite. The war was in their backyards and many had witnessed the horrors of war before ever getting to the front lines. Their paths were not in airplanes, but by foot on trails carved by civilians from bombed out villages. The trails were bombed and destroyed and rebuilt regularly. In one of the stories Nguyen Thi Kim Chuy, a road worker, talked about how an unexploded bomb was too close to a bridge. There was so many who volunteered to destroy the bomb that they had have an essay

contest to determine who would get the privilege to perform the dangerous task. These circumstances would provide a tremendous amount of resolve for the average Vietnamese soldier. While the US soldiers were wondering why they were there in the first place and missing home the Viet Cong were fighting for their homes. They were cornered and willing to fight to the end.

The Air War is another example in which the US had a technology advantage but was neutralized by the intangible factors of the Vietnamese. The US dropped more than three times the amount of bombs in the Vietnam War than in all of World War 2. Unfortunately for the Americans, the heavy bombardment gained them little advantage. The problem was that Vietnam had such a weak infrastructure that there were few high profile targets to destroy. They figured that if they continued to bomb, the will of the Viet Cong would break but with every bomb dropped the more support the North gained from the southern villagers. By the end, it would seem that the air raids did more harm than good for the American cause.

An example in where the Viet Cong played to the Americans strengths is in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The highlands split North Vietnam from South Vietnam and if the Americans controlled it, they could easily control important supply lines. The Viet Cong was willing fight the US head on to try to gain it. This is like going toe to toe with Sonny Liston and one of the few times the Americans could fight without searching the jungle for the enemy. Although the battle was horrific on both sides, the Americans could claim victory with the Viet Cong losing almost 10 times the amount of soldiers. A face up ground out battle played perfectly to the US technology and training advantages. This was one of the first and few times the Viet Cong was willing to fight large force versus large force. In such warfare, the Viet Cong lost their intangible advantages.

As history teaches us, what should happen doesn't always. Wars can be won by factors not seen or felt. I think the Vietnam War was a great example of this. The fact that an army of starving troops held off the most powerful army in the world is an amazing testimony to the intangibles that can make a big difference. Sometimes the underdog can pull it off.

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