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Jeffrey Record

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Vietnam in Retrospect: Could We Have Won?

JEFFREY RECORD

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"Indochina is devoid of decisive military objectives and the allocation of more than token US armed forces in Indochina would be a serious diversion of limited US capabilities." [1] -- Joint Chiefs of Staff, 26 May 1954

Notwithstanding the departure of the last US combat troops from Vietnam in 1973, the Vietnam War continues to be fought and refought here in the United States. Wars are unpleasant to wage, and even more unpleasant to lose. The Vietnam War has divided Americans as has no other foreign conflict since the War of 1812. George McGovern, politically both product and victim of the war, has declared it "our second civil war. We are going to be fighting [it] for the rest of our lives." [2]

Was the war a noble cause, a crime, or simply a monumental strategic mistake? Did 58,000 Americans die in vain? What was the cause and nature of the conflict? Was US intervention justified? Was it necessary to Americanize the war? What were the causes of US defeat? Was the United States in fact defeated?

These are among the many questions Vietnam-generation Americans continue to ponder, especially those whose lives were directly touched by the war. But perhaps none is more agonizing--and intriguing--than that of whether the United States could have won the war. To this and so many other questions posed by Vietnam there can be no definitive answers. The decisions that propelled the United States into Vietnam and that determined the way we fought the war cannot be undone for the sake of testing what are by now academic hypotheses. One can only speculate about what might have been. Yet the passage of time has afforded a capacity for more informed judgment; we now know much more about the consequences of decisions than we did at the time they were made. Distance, together with the Cold War's demise, also offers the opportunity to develop perspectives on the war less contaminated by blind passion and by the once unquestioned verities of what in hindsight seems a strategically and intellectually hysterical anti-communism.

War Aims

Any fruitful discussion of whether the United States could have won the war in Vietnam requires an agreeable definition of winning. What were declared US war aims? The most immediate and enduring was the preservation of a noncommunist South Vietnam. Satisfaction of this objective, policymakers believed, would not only save yet another people from the yoke of communism, but also serve such broader and more abstract war aims as demonstrating resolve and the credibility of US commitments, thwarting the fall of other Asian dominoes to communism, containing Chinese expansionism, and meeting the challenge posed by communist-inspired wars of national liberation.

The Johnson and Nixon administrations sought at the very least to avoid defeat and its perceived attendant humiliation, loss of prestige, and orgy of domestic political recrimination. Indeed, as early as 1966 defeat-avoidance was becoming, for an increasing number of civilian officials, the central US war aim in Vietnam. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara is known to have harbored serious doubts about the war's winnability as early as late 1965. [3] In that same year, his close and trusted aide John McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, declared in a memo that "70 percent" of the US purpose in Vietnam was "to avoid a humiliating defeat"; [4] in early 1966 he further concluded that "We . . . have in Vietnam the ingredients of an enormous miscalculation. . . . The reasons we *went into* Vietnam to the present depth are varied; but largely academic." [5]

In the end, the United States failed either to avert a communist takeover of South Vietnam, or to avoid humiliation, loss of prestige, and domestic recrimination. To be sure, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and southern National Liberation Front (NLF) did not directly evict US forces from Vietnam, nor even inflict upon them a major set-piece battlefield defeat like the Viet Minh did on the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. General William C. Westmoreland proudly notes that fully two years separated the departure of the last US combat troops from Vietnam in 1973 and the fall of South Vietnam in 1975.[6] But if US forces were not defeated, neither did they inflict a strategically decisive defeat on the communist side. Years of bombing North Vietnam and "attriting" communist forces in South Vietnam neither broke Hanoi's will nor crippled its capacity to fight.

The absence of US military defeat did not guarantee political success. The appearance of Saigon as Ho Chi Minh City for the past 20 years on maps of Southeast Asia is testimony to the defeat of the American cause in Vietnam.

It was thus disingenuous of President Richard Nixon to have declared that, by January 1973, when the Paris peace agreement was signed, "We had won the war in Vietnam. We had attained the one political goal for which we had fought the war. The South Vietnamese people would have the right to determine their own political future." [7] In Nixon's view, the lack of a decisive communist military victory, combined with a peace agreement that denied the communist side any political gains in the South and a White House pledge to President Thieu to employ US air power on behalf of South Vietnam in response to any major communist violations of the agreement--all added up to a clear win that could have been permanent but for subsequent congressional betrayal of South Vietnam.

Yet the Paris agreement remained silent on the very issue that had elicited US intervention in the first place: the aggressive North Vietnamese military presence in the South. The agreement mandated the departure of remaining US forces from Vietnam, but *not* that of the estimated 145,000-160,000 readily and massively reinforcing NVA regulars encamped in the Central Highlands,[8] to whose tender mercies the Thieu regime was effectively abandoned.

It is understandable that the Nixon White House signed an agreement that left the NVA in South Vietnam; no piece of paper could achieve what the force of US arms had failed to achieve for eight years. But in so doing, Nixon and Henry Kissinger, as savvy and cynical a pair of practitioners of realpolitik as have ever conducted US foreign policy, surely recognized (President Thieu certainly did) that the Paris agreement constituted little more than a brief military intermission in a struggle that Hanoi would certainly resume sooner or later. The agreement left North Vietnam's political will and military capacity intact, and neither Nixon nor Kissinger should have been under any illusions about either. As Kissinger later remarked about the US decision to intervene in Vietnam, "If America had searched the world over, it could not have found a more intractable adversary." [9] And surely both men must have anticipated the probability of congressional attempts to cripple any prospective reentry of the United States into the Vietnam morass. By 1973 it was hardly a secret that public opinion had soured bitterly on the war, and that Congress was controlled by a Democratic Party dominated increasingly by uncompromising anti-war liberals.

The communists may not have won the war in 1973, but they certainly did in 1975, and they did so in part because they correctly gauged the depth of American public and congressional aversion to jumping back into the war. All of this points to the conclusion that the Paris agreement may have been intended as simply a face-saving device to provide a "decent interval" (Kissinger's choice of words at various symposia on the war in 1967 and 1968[10]) between the departure from Saigon of MACV and the arrival of the NVA. Westmoreland himself has declared that "the so-called Paris Peace Agreement . . . had practically little if any chance of success." [11] The late Dean Rusk went even further: the accords "were in effect a surrender. Any agreement that left North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam meant the eventual takeover of South Vietnam." [12]

The War's Character

Perhaps no issue has more bedeviled discussions of the Vietnam War than that of determining what kind of war it was. Clausewitz observed that the "first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its true nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive." [13]

No informed judgment on the war's winnability is possible without first assessing its character--and herein lies the rub: at one time or another the Vietnam War has been described as limited, total, civil, international, conventional, and unconventional (e.g., guerrilla, insurgent, revolutionary).

Generally speaking, those who believe the war was, from the American vantage point, both morally noble and militarily winnable contend that it was so precisely because the conflict was a case of international aggression waged conventionally, or at least susceptible to conventional defeat. Harry Summers, Jr., asserts that the Vietnam War "was in the final analysis a conventional war" and that North Vietnam was "the source of the war." [14] Westmoreland agrees: "South Vietnam was not conquered by the guerrilla. It was conquered by the North Vietnamese army." [15] Nixon wrote: "We failed to understand that the war was an invasion from North Vietnam, not an insurgency in South Vietnam. North Vietnam . . . shrewdly camouflaged its invasion to look like a civil war. But in fact the Vietnam War was the Korean War with jungles." [16]

Conversely, those who believe the war was unwinnable and that the United States had no business in Vietnam anyway claim that the conflict was essentially a civil war among Vietnamese who had been artificially and temporarily divided by the Cold War, and that it was unconventional, even revolutionary in character. Daniel Ellsberg has called it "a war of independence and a revolution." [17] Sir Robert Thompson, writing in 1969, characterized the war as "basically an insurgency within South Vietnam boosted by infiltration, raids, and an element of invasion from North Vietnam." [18] (Thompson supported his contention by citing official estimates that at the end of 1967--i.e., just before the Tet Offensive--North Vietnamese forces comprised only about 20 percent of total communist military strength in South Vietnam.) [19] Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts have tagged Vietnam as "a civil war for national independence." [20]

How can a single war have so many perceived and seemingly contradictory faces? There has never been any doubt about the nature of World Wars I and II or the Korean War. One is tempted to conclude that simply the desire to make a lost war look retrospectively noble and winnable--or ignoble and doomed from the start--is enough to father whatever characterization is most appropriate. A more satisfying if perplexing conclusion is that the war was, *at one time or another*, all of the above: *limited* (for the United States), *total* (for North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front), *civil* (at stake was the future political control of South Vietnam), *international* (the war elicited massive direct US and indirect Soviet and Chinese intervention), *conventional* (for the United States and its South Vietnamese ally from 1965 on, and increasingly, after the Tet Offensive, for the North Vietnamese), *guerrilla* (largely for both North Vietnam and the NLF before the Tet Offensive), and *revolutionary* (the communist side sought not only national reunification but also imposition on the South of a revolutionary social order). In this regard, the Vietnam War bears a striking resemblance to the American War for Independence. [21]

The Vietnam War admits of no easy definition. What began in the late 1950s on the communist side as a low-grade and militarily self-sustaining insurgency in the South had by 1975 evolved into straightforward North Vietnamese conventional aggression. But the fact of communist conventionality in 1975 proves nothing about the character of the war in 1960 or 1965. Vietnamese communist revolutionary war doctrine, based on Chinese theory and practice, envisaged just such a progression from guerrilla warfare to conventional military victory. Phillip Davidson, who served as the chief US military intelligence officer during the height of the war, persuasively argues that "the real question" in the postwar debate over strategies pursued and not pursued in Vietnam "was *not* what was the proper strategy to guide the ground war in South Vietnam, but *what kind of war was the United States fighting in Vietnam at any given period*." [22] World War II was conventional from start to finish; the Vietnam War started as one kind of war and ended as another.

The US war effort was compromised not only by failure to appreciate the complexity and evolution of the war's character, but also by a fundamental ignorance of the country, its history and culture. There was, too, an inability to grasp the fact that no foreign participant in someone else's civil war can possibly have as great a stake in the conflict's outcome--and attendant willingness to sacrifice--as do the indigenous parties involved. Some of the best and the brightest in Washington eagerly embraced the Vietnam War as a test of US ability to master a limited war in the nuclear age, [23] but failed to understand that for Hanoi and the NLF the war was as total as had been the Civil War for the United States.

Victory's Feasibility

Could Hanoi's will, capacity to fight, or both, have been broken by US military action short of a morally and politically unacceptable outright obliteration of North Vietnam's population and territory? Could Hanoi's communist leadership have been compelled to cease its attempts to reunify Vietnam by force, and is so, by what means?

The United States, to repeat, was not militarily beaten in Vietnam. Indeed, by 1973 the United States and its South Vietnamese ally had stalemated the North Vietnamese conventional military threat and were decisively defeating the indigenous southern insurgent component of the communist threat.

In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, which politically and militarily was the Continental Divide of the Vietnam War, the communist leadership relied increasingly on conventional military operations, and it did so in part because of a dramatic erosion of the communist political base in South Vietnam. The Viet Cong never recovered from their disastrous Tet losses, and the NLF's political and military viability was further compromised by the US firepower-generated flight of millions of rural Vietnamese into the cities, and by an accelerated pacification program that both killed off many remaining Viet Cong cadre as well as delivered genuine land reform and prosperity to much of rural South Vietnam. By virtually all accounts, the percentage of South Vietnam's population under effective communist control dropped sharply during the period between the Tet Offensive and the Paris peace agreement.[24]

But the significance of this admittedly impressive accomplishment was questionable by 1973. If the original insurgent threat had receded, the conventional military threat posed by an expanding and increasingly well-equipped North Vietnamese army had mushroomed, and the long-term military balance in Vietnam looked bleak for Saigon. How was Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), with its myriad deficiencies, to survive the inevitable showdown with the very enemy that not even a half million US troops with their vastly superior firepower could crush?[25] Indeed, was not "Vietnamization" little more than (in Phillip Davidson's words) a "cut and run" strategy?[26]

Communist preference for conventional military operations derived not simply from the evaporation of insurgent options; it was also driven by the departure of US ground combat forces and the availability of massive quantities of sophisticated Soviet arms. The former, accompanied by clear indications that the United States was not prepared to re-enter the war even if inaction spelled South Vietnam's demise,[27] meant that Saigon would have to fight alone; increased Soviet assistance meant that Saigon would no longer enjoy even a nominal conventional military advantage over the North Vietnamese army.

Those who believe the war was winnable contend that the US defeat in Vietnam was self-inflicted, blaming civilian perfidy, professional military errors, or some combination of both. The most extreme opinion absolves the armed forces of any significant responsibility: the military was simply stabbed in the back by a hostile press, a treasonous antiwar movement, and above all, a meddling and feckless White House and Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD--i.e., McNamara and his "whiz kids," whom the military had come to detest long before US ground combat forces entered Vietnam). Military affairs correspondent Hanson Baldwin lamented that "the blame for the lost war rests, *not* upon the men in uniform, but upon the civilian policy makers in Washington and those who evolved and developed the policies of gradualism, flexible response, off-again-on-again bombing, negotiated victory, and, ultimately, one-arm-behind-the-back restraint, and scuttle-and-run." [28] Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, who headed the US Pacific Command during the critical years of the war, has claimed that the US military "was not permitted to fight this war to win" by a civilian leadership petrified by "the possibility of Communist Chinese and Soviet intervention," and that the US national will was destroyed by "a skillfully waged subversive propaganda campaign, aided and abetted by the media's bombardment of sensationalism, rumors, and half-truths" about the war.[29]

Yet condemnation of the media is a dog that won't hunt. While the media's professional performance in covering the war left much to be desired, the fact remains that until the Tet Offensive, which prompted a dramatic lowering of de facto US war aims, from seeking a military victory to searching for an "honorable" way out of Vietnam, both the print and broadcast media by and large supported the war, in many cases buying the official and congenitally optimistic line on the war's course. Moreover, the early skepticism over official prognoses by such bright and ambitious young journalists as Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnette, and David Halberstam was justifiably fueled by the yawning gap between, on the one hand, what they saw in the field with their own eyes--and were told by such US Army advisors as the legendary John Paul Vann--and, on the other, the appreciations to which they were treated by such career optimists as Ambassador Fritz Nolting and Westmoreland's predecessor, Paul Harkins (who, among other things, called ARVN's

calamitous performance in the January 1963 Battle of Ap Bac "a victory." [30])

The press justifiably was suspicious of an official reporting system whose integrity was constantly threatened by a near-maniacal preoccupation with quantification and pleasing superiors. Westmoreland himself concedes that in "those early days the newsmen were sometimes closer to the truth than were American officials, for there can be no question but that Paul Harkins was overly optimistic." [31]

With respect to the organized antiwar movement, which is not to be confused with the broader and far more influential phenomenon of antiwar sentiment, there is still no persuasive evidence that it had a significant effect on the formulation and implementation of US war policy. On the contrary, to the extent that the antiwar movement became a vehicle for the emerging counterculture of the 1960s, it probably turned off many more Americans than it turned on. [32] Most Americans simply did not wish to be associated with unwashed hippies, and certainly not with political radicals shrieking condemnation of American society and mores. The most effective antiwar initiatives came not in the form of street demonstrations, but rather post-Johnson Administration congressional amendments that progressively limited the President's military freedom of action in Indochina. [33]

If the press and the antiwar movement offer poor targets for those seeking to discover the roots of US defeat in Vietnam, the same cannot be said of the White House and the OSD. Civilian authority did indeed impose significant, and in some cases tactically absurd, restrictions on the use of force in Indochina; for the United States the conflict was, after all, a war fought with limited means for limited ends. What remains disputable is whether those restrictions thwarted a decisive military victory. And on this matter it is essential to reiterate that pursuit of military victory was abandoned in the wake of the Tet Offensive. The issue of the war's winnability thus boils down to whether the United States could have obtained such a victory before or during the Tet Offensive and its aftermath. Postwar discussion of prospects for a military victory rightly focuses on the pre-Tet years precisely because pursuit of such a victory was dropped after Tet. And to fashion a winning strategy the United States had a full three years--a longer period of time than that which separated the US Army's first contact with German forces in North Africa in November 1942 and Germany's surrender in May 1945.

Was defeat snatched from the jaws of victory by Johnson's refusal to mobilize the reserves; to permit US ground forces to invade Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam; and to authorize the bombing of all targets in North Vietnam that the Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted to bomb and when they wanted to bomb them? Would a full reserve mobilization really have made a decisive difference? Could the Ho Chi Minh Trail really have been effectively interdicted by an occupation of southern Laos and by trans-DMZ forays into North Vietnam's panhandle? Could North Vietnam's determination and ability to fight really have been destroyed from the air?

We will never know the answers to these questions, though logic suggests that a less restrained US use of force in Indochina would have made life considerably more difficult, but not necessarily impossible, for the communist side. We do know what did *not* work: commitment of over 500,000 US troops; release of over 8,000,000 tons of bombs on suspected enemy targets; and a strategy of punishing North Vietnam from the air while attempting to grind down enemy strength in the South via seeking out and destroying his big units in the Central Highlands and around the DMZ.

In South Vietnam, where the US military operated without significant civilian-imposed restraints, Westmoreland opted for a strategy of attrition. Though others within the military and beyond questioned the wisdom of the strategy, [34] Westmoreland has claimed that attrition was dictated by manpower constraints and by White House prohibition of US ground operations outside South Vietnam. [35] He has also dismissed the alternative of a population protection--or enclave--strategy as a defensive one that would have ceded the initiative to the enemy. [36] Westmoreland thus chose to kill communist regulars rather than protect friendlies, no doubt in part because he mistakenly assumed that by doing the former he was accomplishing the latter.

We now know that the combination of bombardment in the North and attrition in the South failed, and we know why it failed: gross underestimation of North Vietnam's tenacity, overestimation of its vulnerability to strategic bombing, and an inability to kill enemy troops in the field at a rate exceeding the communist side's capacity to replace them (the notorious "cross-over point"). Contrary to Westmoreland's conviction that search-and-destroy would deprive the

communists of the initiative, the enemy for most of the war managed to control his own casualties by determining the initiation of as much as 88 percent of all tactical engagements.[37] Until the Tet Offensive, the communist side sought population control, not territorial acquisition, and therefore routinely refused combat except in the most favorable circumstances.

Which brings us to a more reflective body of opinion on the war's winnability. Such military observers as Harry Summers, Jr., Andrew Krepinevich, Jr., David Hackworth, Dave Richard Palmer, Douglas Kinnard, and Bruce Palmer, Jr., are critical of the professional military's performance in Vietnam as well as that of civilian authority. Readers will discover among their writings[38] often brutal condemnations of professional hubris, the attrition strategy, excessive use of firepower, reliance on lavish base camps, self-defeating personnel rotation policies, command disunity and micromanagement, and an officer corps corrupted by careerism--none of which can be laid at the doorsteps of McNamara's whiz kids, David Halberstam, or Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda. These and other critics have properly concluded that no debacle as epic as America's in Vietnam can be ascribed solely to either military or civilian authority. Neither acquitted itself well, though ultimate responsibility for what happened to the United States in Vietnam rests with the White House. Harry Summers has observed that much of the criticism of political interference in military operations "is off the mark. Our problem was not so much political interference as it was a lack of a coherent military strategy--a lack for which our military leaders share a large burden of responsibility." [39]

All of this begs the question of whether an alternative military strategy could have succeeded in reducing the communist threat to South Vietnam, at least to the point where it could have been handled by an ARVN supported indirectly by US military assistance. Andrew Krepinevich contends that the Vietnam War was predominately an insurgency in the South, and that MACV wrongly responded to it with a conventional firepower/attrition strategy rather than a population protection strategy emphasizing intelligence, police work, long-term patrolling, and reliance on night operations. A counterinsurgency strategy would have deemphasized firepower, focusing on eliminating the insurgents' infrastructure rather than his field forces.[40] Conversely, Summers contends that the United States entered the war mistaking it for an indigenous insurgency rather than the conventional aggression he claims it really was, and that America's defeat in Vietnam was attributable in large measure to a strategy that failed to concentrate sufficiently on North Vietnam and its supply lines to the South.[41]

Krepinevich's assessment of the war's predominantly insurgent character is on the mark--at least until the Tet Offensive. But let us assume that MACV had mustered the patience, skill, imagination, and institutional courage to pursue a population protection strategy from the beginning (a mighty assumption indeed), and further, that such a strategy could have broken the back of the insurgent component of the communist threat by 1968--as in fact it ultimately did by 1973. Would the American cause in Vietnam then have prevailed? Probably not, since the war's history shows that defeating the insurgency simply encouraged a communist shift to conventional military operations. The communists were prepared to fight more than one kind of war, whereas MACV was not. (If only the commies had been accommodating enough to fight conventionally in the years before the Tet Offensive!)

Summers' assessment of the war's predominantly conventional character is also on the mark--but only *after* Tet. The war's alleged conventionality (and therefore winnability) before Tet is not retrospectively proved by photos of uniformed NVA regulars driving Soviet-made North Vietnamese tanks into Saigon. Nor, as Summers contends, did the US Army in the early 1960s enthusiastically embrace counterinsurgency; in fact, despite considerable White House pressure, the Army brass fiercely and successfully resisted it, convinced that, as Army Chief of Staff (1960-62) George Decker put it, "Any good soldier can handle guerrillas." [42] But the central weakness of the Summers analysis is its refusal to concede that until 1968 the communist military effort in the South, though directed and increasingly assisted from Hanoi (largely in response to US escalation beginning in 1965), rested on a genuine political foundation and was conducted largely by forces indigenous to South Vietnam and with resources drawn largely from inside South Vietnam. This was the principal reason why the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign of 1965-68 failed, and why a pre-Tet US invasion of Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail also would have proved indecisive.[43]

Indeed, the entire postwar search for the winning military strategy is to some extent beside the point, which is that from the outset the entire US military effort rested on both South Vietnamese and American political quicksand. The failure of both the White House and the armed forces to come fully to grips with the ultimate *military* consequences of this reality contributed more to US defeat in Vietnam than did deficiencies in military strategy and performance. JCS

Chairman Earle G. Wheeler's declaration in 1962--amidst clear signs of the Diem regime's impending political implosion--that "the essence of the problem in Vietnam is military"[44] reflected a persistent bureaucratic determination to define the challenge in Vietnam in a manner that permitted avoidance of having to grapple with the unpleasant and seemingly intractable political dimension of the war.

In South Vietnam, military operations, however successful they may have been at times, could never make good the absence of a legitimate and competent South Vietnamese political authority, a situation made all the worse by the US-encouraged overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 and the Americanization of the war two years later. Diem's fall was probably inevitable with or without US connivance (by mid-1963 the regime had alienated all classes of South Vietnamese society, and had taken to gunning down Buddhist monks and to jailing the school children of its own military officers and civil servants[45]); and by 1965 the war's Americanization was the only alternative to South Vietnam's collapse. But no Saigon regime in the wake of these two events could hope to attract a level of legitimacy and measure of popular appeal sufficient to compete effectively with the communists' superb exploitation of the appeals of reunification and of national liberation from foreign domination.[46] Richard Nixon observed that in the 1960s "we failed to understand that we could not win the war for the South Vietnamese; that, in the final analysis, the South Vietnamese would have to win it for themselves. The United States bullied its way into Vietnam and tried to run the war our way instead of recognizing that our mission should have been to help the South Vietnamese build up their forces so they could win the war." [47]

Yet suppose that the United States had retained an air and ground combat presence in Vietnam after 1973, as it did in Korea after 1953 (in contrast to the Paris agreement, which mandated withdrawal of remaining US combat forces from Vietnam, the Korean armistice permitted retention of US bases and combat forces south of the 38th parallel). South Vietnam would have remained a costly and probably permanent military ward of the United States (ARVN never exhibited the level of fighting power achieved by South Korean troops, which were integrated with US units and fought under US command in a war that was largely conventional in character)--a strategic drain on American power in an area peripheral to core US security interests (in contrast to the Korean Peninsula's critical strategic importance).

Without a continued US military presence after 1973, South Vietnam would surely have been as doomed as it was in 1965 without massive US intervention. "Even if the United States had continued its military assistance at the 1972-1973 level," concludes Davidson, "the combination of the inherent debilities of the Thieu government and the power and determination of the North Vietnamese would have eventually destroyed the Republic of Vietnam." [48] The claim that congressional miserliness doomed South Vietnam fails to explain why, in 1975, after a generous 20-year US investment, ARVN folded like a house of cards, abandoning intact to the NVA billions of dollars' worth of US military equipment.

The real domino in the Vietnam War was American public opinion. From the very beginning of US escalatory moves in early 1965 there were limits to American public and congressional tolerance of the war's cost and duration. These limits were moreover reinforced by the Johnson Administration's behavior: its refusal to arouse popular emotion on the war's behalf, its failure to make a compelling strategic case for massive US intervention, its deliberate and repeated public misrepresentation of the war's "progress" and of its own escalatory intentions, and its refusal to make hard political choices.

Petrified at the prospect of a right-wing backlash if it simply cut its losses in Vietnam, but unwilling to jeopardize prospects for congressional passage of its ambitious Great Society agenda, and also convinced that Hanoi had an attainable breaking point, the Johnson White House steered a course in Vietnam that combined rosy official prognoses with a level of military investment sufficient to avoid defeat but ultimately inadequate to produce the conclusive and favorable end to the war it sought. The result was the very kind of bloody, protracted--and for the United States, indecisive--war that Hanoi's strategists sought to impose upon the United States and which had worked so well against the French. Hanoi seemed to understand better than Washington that the center of gravity of the American war effort was domestic public opinion, not Westmoreland's legions traipsing around the Central Highlands. The Tet Offensive *appeared* to be an American defeat not so much because it was inaccurately reported by the press, but rather because it was launched in the wake of an intense official public relations campaign to convince Americans that the communist tide in Vietnam was receding for good and that victory was within reach.

To be sure, in the post-Tet years of the war the communist side's increasing reliance on conventional, territory-oriented military operations as a substitute for population control exposed the NVA directly to US firepower with exactly the kind of disastrous results that befell Hanoi's Easter offensive of 1972. But prospects for a decisive US conventional win depended on the combination of a North Vietnam incapable of learning from its mistakes and a US Congress infinitely patient and generous. Neither materialized. After 1972 Hanoi simply postponed a final reckoning with Saigon until it was certain the United States would not reenter the war under any circumstances; and Congress, reflecting intense public eagerness to wash America's hands of the war as well as of the South Vietnamese political and military basket case on whose behalf so much blood and treasure had been expended, made damned sure that there would be no going back.

Richard Nixon, who blamed Congress for Saigon's fall, was nonetheless sympathetic:

Congress was in part the prisoner of events. The leaders of the United States in the crucial years of the early and mid-1960s failed to come up with a strategy that would produce victory. Instead, they simply poured in more and more US troops and materiel into South Vietnam. . . . They misled the public by insisting we were winning the war and thereby prepared the war for defeatism and demagoguery later on. The American people could not be expected to continue indefinitely to support a war in which they were told victory was around the corner, but which required greater and greater effort without any obvious signs of improvement.[49]

Norman Podhoretz, who believes that American intervention in the Vietnam War was "an attempt born of noble ideals and impulses," has concluded that "the only way the United States could have avoided defeat in Vietnam was by staying out of the war altogether." [50] His judgment, in retrospect, appears to be as reasonable as any. The United States intervened in the Vietnam War on behalf of a weak and incompetent ally, and it pursued a conventional military victory against a wily, elusive, and extraordinarily determined opponent who shifted to ultimately decisive conventional military operations only after inevitable American political exhaustion undermined potentially decisive US military responses. Even had the United States attained a conclusive military decision, its cost would have exceeded any possible benefit. Vietnam was then, and remains today, a strategic backwater, and the US decision to fight there in the 1960s was driven by a doctrine of containing communism that in the 1950s was witlessly militarized and indiscriminately extended to all of Asia. Bernard Brodie observed in the early 1970s that "it is now clear what we mean by calling the United States intervention in Vietnam a failure. . . . We mean that at least as early as the beginning of 1968 even the most favorable outcome . . . could not remotely be worth the price we would have paid for it." [51]

The key to US defeat was a profound underestimation of enemy tenacity and fighting power, an underestimation born of a happy ignorance of Vietnamese history, a failure to appreciate the fundamental civil dimensions of the war, and a preoccupation with the measurable indices of military power and attendant disdain for the ultimately decisive intangibles. In 1965, Maxwell Taylor confessed that "the ability of the Viet Cong continuously to rebuild their units and make good their losses is one of the mysteries of this guerrilla war. We still find no plausible explanation of the continued strength of the Viet Cong." [52] Four years later, Vo Nguyen Giap commented that the "United States has a strategy based on arithmetic. They question the computers, add and subtract, extract square roots, and then go into action. But arithmetical strategy doesn't work here. If it did, they'd have already exterminated us." [53]

The United States could not have prevented the forcible reunification of Vietnam under communist auspices at a morally, materially, and strategically acceptable price.

NOTES

1. JCS Memorandum to the Secretary of Defense. Reprinted in George C. Herring, ed. *The Pentagon Papers, Abridged Edition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), p. 16.
2. Quoted in Marc Fisher, "Reopening the Wounds of Vietnam," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 1-7 May 1995, p. 10.
3. McNamara, more than any other high-level policymaker associated with US intervention in Vietnam, embodied the

combination of arrogance and ignorance that plagued the United States in Vietnam from the outset.

4. Quoted in Herring, p. 115.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

6. "When South Vietnam was taken over by the North Vietnamese army, American combat troops had departed some two years earlier. This is very important, and everybody should know it, but there are many people in this country who do not." William C. Westmoreland, "Vietnam in Perspective," Patrick J. Hearden, ed., *Four American Perspectives* (West Lafayette, In.: Purdue Univ. Press, 1990), p. 44.

7. Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Avon Books, 1985), p. 97.

8. William B. Le Gro, *Vietnam From Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, 1985), p. 2.

9. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 632.

10. Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger, A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 485.

11. Westmoreland, p. 48.

12. Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990), p. 491.

13. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 88.

14. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy, A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 113.

15. Westmoreland, p. 42.

16. Nixon, p. 47.

17. Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 157.

18. Robert Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), p. 116.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

20. Leslie H. Gelb with Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1979), p. 343.

21. The War for Independence was first and foremost a civil war among Englishmen, but it was also, after the formation of the Franco-American alliance of 1778, a struggle between England and France. Direct French intervention on the American side was decisive, with France providing credits, munitions, armies--and sufficient naval power to gain control of American waters from the British in 1781, thus sealing the fate of the British garrison at Yorktown. For American revolutionaries who pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to gaining independence, the war was total, though for Britain it was a limited war. Combat was both conventional, as waged in set-piece battles between British army and Continental Army regulars, as well as unconventional, as waged in the southern colonies by revolutionary and Tory partisan forces. The American victory came in the final analysis via a combination of French assistance, wily generalship on the part of George Washington, and the exhaustion of British parliamentary support for the war.

22. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History 1946-1975* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1988), p. 320.

23. Early on in the war Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara remarked that the "greatest contribution Vietnam is making--rightly or wrongly is beside the point--is that it is developing an ability in the United States to fight a limited war, to go to war without the necessity of arousing the public ire." Quoted in Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were In Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 80.

24. See, for example, Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), p. 192; and George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1979), p. 240.

25. Ineffective South Vietnamese military performance confronted US policymakers in 1965 with the stark choice of Americanizing the war or writing off South Vietnam. Yet the decision to Americanize the war undermined creation of any incentives for improvements in ARVN's performance. Subsequent attempts to "Vietnamize" the war's conduct ran afoul of failure to eliminate the very deficiencies in ARVN that prompted Americanization in the first place: a corrupt, highly politicized, and all too often professionally incompetent officer corps; an underpaid, poorly disciplined, homesick, and often demoralized soldiery; enormous class division between the officer corps and enlisted ranks; insufficient technical expertise and training; and bad internal security--i.e., communist penetration.

26. Davidson, p. 477.

27. General Van Tien Dung, commander of the 1975 North Vietnamese invasion, has recounted the October 1974 discussion within Hanoi's leadership councils over the wisdom of proceeding with the invasion:

One question was posed and discussed heatedly. . . : Did the Americans have the ability to send troops back into South Vietnam when our large attacks lead to the danger of the Saigon's army's collapse? Everyone saw clearly and paid special attention to the fact that since they had signed the Paris Agreement on Vietnam and had been forced to withdraw their troops from South Vietnam, the Americans had grown more confused and were in greater difficulty than before. The internal contradictions within the United States administration and between the American political parties, too, were growing sharper. The Watergate affair had agitated the whole country. . . . The United States was in an economic recession, inflation was increasing, unemployment had become serious, and the fuel crisis was continuing.

Van Tien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory*, trans. John Spragens, Jr. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), pp. 19-20.

28. Hanson Baldwin, "Foreword," in U. S. G. Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat, Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1978), p. xiii.

29. Sharp, *ibid.*, pp. 4, 270. White House fears of Chinese intervention were certainly understandable. Lyndon Johnson well remembered China's intervention in the Korean War following General Douglas MacArthur's contrary assurances to President Harry Truman.

30. Quoted in William Prochau, *Once Upon a Distant War, Young War Correspondents and the Early Vietnam Battles* (New York: Times Books, 1995), p. 293.

31. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1976), p. 80.

32. See, for example, Adam Garfinkle, *Telltale Hearts, The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

33. In 1970, congressional legislation banned funding for any and all US ground force operations in Cambodia and Laos. In July 1973, six months after completion of the Paris peace agreement, passage of an amendment sponsored by Senators George McGovern and Mark Hatfield proscribed funding for any further US military operations in or over Indochina. Four months later came passage over President Nixon's veto of the War Powers Act

34. Among those known to have opposed--or to have harbored serious reservations about--Westmoreland's selection of

search-and-destroy/attrition were US Marine Corps Commandant Wallace Greene and General Victor Krulak, US Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson and General Creighton Abrams, retired Army generals Matthew Ridgway and James Gavin, Sir Robert Thompson, Henry Kissinger, the CIA, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, and former Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman. See, for example, Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War? Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 230-72.

35. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 185.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

37. Andrew Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), p. 188.

38. See Summers, *op. cit.*; Krepinevich, *op. cit.*; David Hackworth and Julie Sherman, *About Face, The Odyssey of an American Warrior* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet, A History of the Vietnam War from a Military Man's Viewpoint* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978); Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers, American Generals Reflect on Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979); and Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War, America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1984).

39. Summers, p. 143.

40. Krepinevich, p. 53.

41. See Summers, pp. 72-88.

42. Quoted in Krepinevich, p. 37.

43. As late as August 1967 NVA troops in the South numbered an estimated 55,000, compared to an estimated 245,000 Viet Cong. Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win, Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996), p. 191.

44. Quoted in Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation, The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1967), p. 426.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 495-96.

46. The influential columnist Joseph Alsop, a die-hard supporter of US intervention, toured communist-held areas of the Mekong Delta in 1955 and wrote in *The New Yorker*: "I could hardly imagine a Communist government that was also a popular government and almost a democratic government. But this is just the sort of government that the palm hut state actually was while the struggle with the French continued. The Viet Minh could not possibly have carried on the resistance for one year, let alone five years, without the people's strong, united support." Quoted in Marvin E. Gettleman, et al., eds. *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), p. 142.

47. Richard Nixon, *The Real War* (New York: Warner Books, 1983), pp. 105-06.

48. Davidson, p. 657.

49. Nixon, *The Real War*, p. 119.

50. Podhoretz, pp. 172, 62.

51. Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 163.

52. Quoted in George McT. Kahin, *Intervention, How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p. 249.

53. Quoted in James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 145.

Dr. Jeffrey Record teaches a course on the Vietnam War at the Georgia Institute of Technology. He served with the State Department in Vietnam in 1968-69 under the auspices of the Civil Operations for Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program, an integrated civilian-military advisory effort at the provincial level. He was a psychological operations advisor in the lower Mekong Delta, Deputy Assistant Province Advisor in Ba Xuyen Province, and Assistant Province Advisor in Bac Lieu Province. Dr. Record subsequently worked as a legislative assistant to Senator Sam Nunn, a columnist for the *Baltimore Sun*, and a policy analyst at the Brookings Institution, the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, the Hudson Institute, and BDM International. He has published several books on defense issues, his latest being *Hollow Victory: A Contrary View of the Gulf War*.

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