Vietnam, the Cold War, and Kosovo: Irony and Confusion over Foreign Policy

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The questions of when, where, and how to employ the nation's military are serious and complex. Not only has the aftermath of the Cold War produced an increasingly intricate foreign policy environment in which the United States is still trying to define its role, but the stakes are high: the lives of America's sons and daughters. James D. Hunter and Francis Fukuyama, in their discussions of "culture wars," do not focus on issues of American military policy per se, and the subject is not one that precisely fits their models of cultural conflict.[1] Nonetheless, while the current ideological debate over the use of our armed forces may not be a "war," it is certainly about war, and Americans are crossing traditional cultural boundaries in their quest to be heard on this topic.

The political leadership in the United States is largely composed of people whose current ideology was shaped mainly by events of the 1960s and, in particular, the Vietnam War. The recent bombing campaign in Kosovo not only demonstrated eerie parallels to the beginnings of our nation's long ordeal in Vietnam, but it also exposed a significant rift among our decisionmakers. Interestingly, the opponents in this debate are not coming down on predictable sides of the political fence. No longer are doves and hawks readily identified as either Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative, left- or right-wing. An examination of the players in this ironic but potentially deadly and world-destabilizing drama illustrates that the culture wars of the 1960s, with their social, economic, and even religious influences, are still shaping the beliefs and decisions of our political and military leaders, and will continue to affect them for some time.

Before examining the effects of the "Age of Contradiction"[2] upon individuals currently in positions of political and cultural influence, a broader examination of the Vietnam-era legacy on our society as a whole is appropriate. America's longest war and its most bitter defeat was the source of extraordinary social stresses during the 1960s. The legacy of those times is perhaps not so momentous when compared to other eras of great social strife, such as the Civil War or the Great Depression. What makes the sixties culturally significant is that so many adults in American society today spent their formative years in that decade.

Those who fought in Vietnam (either through the draft or by volunteering) compose one segment of the baby-boom generation who remain affected by the war. Their obvious counterparts are those Americans who either actively avoided service (legally or illegally) or who actively protested the war. (Certain individuals will undoubtedly fit into more than one category.) There is a third segment of this generation that is largely forgotten in discussions of the aftermath and legacy of Vietnam. Those who neither fought nor protested the war compose a sizable majority of "boomers." Professor Paul Lyons of Stockton College believes the silence of these individuals during such a tumultuous time in our history is the source of significant guilt, and the persistence of this emotion is still influencing the consciousness of millions of Americans. These people constitute, by no coincidence, much of the large, undecided middle, over which so many of today's cultural warriors are fighting. Furthermore, many Americans from this group are now in positions to shape the circumstances in which our military forces are employed. Understanding the events that helped determine this generation's mindset is important.[3]

The Effects of Vietnam

As historian David Levy notes, "The quest for the meaning of the Vietnam War, the endeavor to draw instruction from the long presence there, has always been deeply affected by the political views, the social agendas, the personal

prejudices of those doing the instructing."[4] It is not surprising that those who debate the continuing legacy of the Vietnam War have often taken positions that are in line with their wartime views. Proponents of large-scale bombing in the 1960s continue to extol its virtues, arguing simply that too many political constraints were put in place for this strategy to be successful in Vietnam. Similarly, advocates of Vietnamization, pacification, or even search-and-destroy missions continue to defend, to differing degrees, the positive aspects of each of these programs. Most supporters of the war continue to argue that the war could have been won, usually blaming our defeat on reasons such as political interference and an unwillingness to bomb North Vietnamese cities or even to employ nuclear weapons. Many of this group felt America should not have become involved in a war it did not intend to win and that once the country was engaged, politicians should have left matters in the hands of the military.

Opponents of the war, of course, have fertile ground for their criticism of the policies, strategies, and tactics employed during the conflict, particularly since the loss of over 58,000 American lives did not prevent ultimate victory by the communists. Their principal disagreement is with the US presence in Indochina in the first place, firmly arguing the right of nations to choose their own path, professing a belief in self-determination. They believe the primary lessons Americans should have learned from Vietnam are that we are not destined to be the world's police force and that diplomatic and economic solutions should be thoroughly exhausted before resorting to violence. Opponents of the war point to the US defeat in Vietnam as a poignant example of how our national arrogance and reliance upon power spawned a flawed foreign policy.[5]

When this debate shifts to the larger question of the effects of the Vietnam War upon the future of American foreign (and military) policy, however, the battle lines that were seemingly clear-cut now become somewhat hazy. In the decades after the end of the war in 1975, both sides have tended to moderate their most extreme positions about the effects and lessons of the war. Some opponents of the war initially made arguments that were not just predictably pacifist, but which bordered on traditional isolationism. They believed that conflicts like Vietnam were not worth losing American lives, and they also denounced the violence, brutality, and wastefulness of war in general. Yet most of these individuals were actually not true isolationists or pacifists; they were merely reacting to post-Vietnam emotions, and they would eventually admit that retreating from a role in world events or relying on a simple faith in nonviolence were not policies that the United States could or should pursue. Similarly, supporters of the war had to relax their most extreme positions. The inexorable rise of communism, the domino theory, and other Cold War tenets that had been such useful arguments for continuing the war had not come to pass. Furthermore, the nation's self-esteem as well as that of the military had been shattered, and it was necessary to reassure everyone that America was still a strong and resolute nation.[6]

As a result of the softening of hard-line positions on both sides of the debate over US involvement in Vietnam, most Americans came to agree on several points. First, almost all concurred that the United States did have a significant role to play in world affairs. They also agreed that this role had to be performed with far greater skill and care than Vietnam demonstrated. Our decision whether to intervene in world events in the future had to be carefully based upon our chances for success, proper analysis of the conditions, and certainly not least upon the ability of political and military decisionmakers to convince the American public of the "justness" of the cause. One other point could be agreed upon by all: the nation's leaders would be far more hesitant to embark on similar ventures in the immediate future, because America had been severely burned by its Vietnam experience.

All of these outward agreements did not cover what were some enormous differences lingering in the psyche of many Americans. The Vietnam War may have ended in 1975, but the Cold War still raged. Many former supporters of our efforts in Vietnam saw the "expectation of political timidity" as extremely dangerous. They argued that even the perception of weakness on our part by our adversaries, principally the Soviet Union, could have devastating consequences. Opponents, of course, found this same reluctance somewhat comforting, and to them, this was perhaps the most positive legacy of the war. To them, this result might ensure that we meddled less in other developing nations in the future. In 1973, the War Powers Act was passed despite the veto of President Nixon, and the positions outlined above figured heavily in the congressional debate. In the 1980s, the Weinberger Doctrine, which outlined specific conditions that needed to be met in order to commit the nation's military to combat, would emerge with direct ties to our Vietnam experience.[7]

Balkan Parallels

Events in the Balkans, and in Kosovo in particular, have prompted some journalists to note some striking parallels with our intervention in Southeast Asia over three decades ago. Consider the following quote from a *U.S. News and World Report* article published in April 1999:

> "I have never felt that this war will be won from the air," the President said. But pushed by his advisers who thought defeat was otherwise inevitable, desperate not to be seen as abandoning allies, impervious to military and intelligence advice that bombing would not produce the desired results, the President ordered bombing anyway. He had no clear idea of what to do next. He had already promised not to send in ground troops, and he hoped to resume talks for peace.[8]

The President referred to in this passage is not Bill Clinton in 1999, but Lyndon Johnson 35 years earlier! Johnson, like Clinton, was a Southern-born President initially far more interested in his domestic agenda than in foreign policy, prone to ignore advice from top advisers, and skilled at developing an elaborate spin in order to persuade or subdue his political opponents. In the 1960s, furthermore, a liberal Administration largely ignored military advice, choosing to listen instead to the nonmilitary opinions of Robert McNamara and McGeorge and William Bundy. To be fair to President Johnson, Secretary McNamara filtered out much of this military advice, as H. R. McMaster points out in his work, *Dereliction of Duty*.[9]

Today's military leaders similarly expressed reluctance to President Clinton about US involvement in the Balkans. However, when ordered into Bosnia earlier in the 1990s they had executed their mission with vigor and achieved limited success. In Kosovo, likewise, Pentagon officials were extremely skeptical of the ability to win an air war without at least the credible threat of ground intervention. Again, though, they obeyed the orders of their Commander-in-Chief, and when he finally began to intimate that other means were perhaps not out of the realm of possibility, some measure of success was attained. These parallels demonstrate that America still has much to learn from our time spent in Indochina. Gradual response and limited options are not an ideal way to prosecute a war. Furthermore, it is no small irony that Bill Clinton, once an ardent opponent of both the military establishment and the Vietnam War, has come to employ the armed forces more often than any other modern President and embroiled the nation in a surprisingly "Vietnam-ish" conflict.

Other former opponents of the Vietnam War presented dissenting opinions on the bombing of Kosovo, demonstrating the range of the cultural legacy of the sixties. California State Senator Tom Hayden, who was an antiwar leader in the 1960s and '70s, is still an ardent opponent of military intervention, especially in Kosovo. "Bombs couldn't bring peace in Vietnam," Hayden wrote in a letter to the President, also invoking other terms that instantly bring to mind the Vietnam era, such as "quagmire" and "imperialism."[10] Even former President Jimmy Carter joined Hayden in his call to stop the bombing. However, among Hayden's former compatriots in the struggle to stop the Vietnam War, there is amazing dissension on the current entanglement. This is partly because the Kosovo bombing campaign was largely supported by the Democratic Party (at least within Washington). Other reasons given for the split in a formerly united antiwar front is the lack of a draft in the United States, and the fact that Slobodan Milosevic is broadly perceived as a despicable character. Notable former opponents of military intervention who *supported* the bombing in Serbia included "seasoned antiwar liberal intellectual" Susan Sontag and Democratic Senator Tom Harkin. Both called for the introduction of ground troops to stop the ethnic cleansing.[11]

Joining Hayden and Carter in their opposition to military intervention as a foreign policy tool, and particularly to the bombing in Kosovo, were some particularly strange bedfellows. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott strongly opposed US involvement in Kosovo, and was actually quoted as saying "Give peace a chance."[12] Another Cold War hawk joining Lott as a new dove is Pat Buchanan, who stated that we must not go "marching into the Big Muddy," a phrase last heard from Pete Seeger during the anti-Vietnam protests.[13] Teamed up with Sontag and Harkin in support of the war were steadfast conservatives Senator John McCain, a Prisoner of War in Vietnam for six years; Jeanne Kirkpatrick, President Reagan's Ambassador to the UN; and William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard* and son of one of the fathers of "Neo-Conservatism." Kristol, like many conservatives and liberals who supported US action against Milosovic, believes that in Kosovo the moral and strategic interests of the United States coincided.

What conditions have allowed such normally staunch ideological enemies to achieve harmony on this issue? Essentially, it is the change in America's role in the post-Cold War world. As long as the Soviet Union existed as our

primary enemy, conservatives were usually hawks, and liberals, doves. Hawks generally believed that US intervention and the use of military force were necessary and justified if communism threatened our national interest. Doves normally protested these policies, believing strongly in the right of self-determination and not perceiving communism to be the threat that their conservative counterparts did. The end of the Cold War dramatically changed both ways of thinking. "Suddenly," says *New York Times* columnist Patricia Cohen, "the definition of the national interest was up for grabs."[14] Human rights are worth fighting for, many liberals began to say, and consequently reflexive opposition to military action has not come so quickly in the 1990s to the former peaceniks of the sixties. Instead of seeing the United States as fighting for a perceived narrow national interest, it is now palatable for liberals to favor sending American troops to fight and die to stop human rights abuses around the world. Cohen writes: "`The automatic-no has evaporated,' says Todd Gitlin, who led antiwar sit-ins in the 1960s and now teaches at New York University. `I think it is a sea change. Just wars are not only possible, but legion.'"[15]

Ironically, some former hawks feel that military force is *not* justified in places like Kosovo for essentially the same reasons that some former doves (recently referred to by one columnist as the "chicken hawks"[16]) feel that it is: the lack of strategic or national interests. Dr. Henry Kissinger, like Caspar Weinberger and other previously consistent hawks, firmly believes that our presence in the Balkans is a flawed foreign policy, and that it is "absurd" to insist that world (or even European) stability depends upon US intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo. In another ironic correlation to Vietnam, President Clinton has attempted to apply a variation of the Cold War domino theory in relation to the Balkans, implying that if events there go unchecked, the repercussions for all of Europe could be disastrous. However, people on all sides of this issue have generally agreed that once committed, the United States had to stay the course and ensure victory. Maintaining NATO and US credibility, it seemed, was agreed to be important above all other concerns.[17]

The Broader View

America has not been the sole setting for this sixties-legacy culture war. The current leaders of Britain, France, Germany, and even Italy have their own antiwar protest baggage which they have had to shed during this multilateral intervention. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has been one of President Clinton's strongest supporters, but his appointment of Robin Cook as Foreign Secretary concerned US officials because of Cook's pacifist activities in the 1980s. German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder was also decidedly antimilitary in the 1980s, voting against several defense budgets because of plans to employ American nuclear missiles in Europe. His Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, another former antimilitary activist, has been instrumental in directing democratic Germany's first combat action outside its borders. At the ceremony celebrating NATO's 50th anniversary in April 1999, Fischer stated, "I never dreamed I would be spending my 51st birthday at a NATO foreign ministers' conference."[18] (And at a building now named after Ronald Reagan, no less.)

French President Jacques Chirac and his Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin are both military veterans, but until recently they have held a decidedly anti-NATO stance. For France, this sentiment goes back to the 1960s when Charles de Gaulle kicked the NATO headquarters out of his country because of his belief that the organization was merely an instrument for US domination. This year Chirac promised NATO Commander General Wesley Clark all the French military aircraft he needed in support of the Kosovo bombing campaign. Even Italy's socialist and former communist Prime Minister Massimo d'Alema showed unflagging support for the operation, and this from a man that vehemently opposed Italy's support of the Persian Gulf War. Events in Kosovo truly have marked a sea change in world politics, and in the world's politicians.[19]

Is this sea change just an interesting set of ironies in the post-Cold War political setting, or does it reflect a larger cultural conflict that is taking place not only in the world's capitals but within the hearts of men and women who were fundamentally altered by their various experiences in the decade of the sixties? James Hunter and others have restricted their study of culture wars to those primarily American social issues that tend to reach across previously unspanned ideological divisions. While former clashes were predominantly between Jews and Christians, or Catholics and Protestants, the more recent struggles have been more likely to occur between groups or individuals that follow traditional, orthodox paths and those who are searching for new interpretations of religious doctrine or even a completely secular existence. Abortion, gay rights, school vouchers, and family and individual values are examples of the types of struggles taken up by these ideological combatants. The use of the US military in foreign policy may not

fit comfortably with such issues, but it has certainly become a topic that has induced people to cross political and ideological boundaries formerly thought to be impassable. The decade of the 1960s produced many of these barriers, and the Vietnam War, in particular, was the event that affected everyone. The large, perhaps "guilt-ridden" middle that remained silent during Vietnam may end up having a positive influence on this debate, since more and more they feel compelled to speak out on issues. As they do, they may serve as an agent of compromise between the more vocal factions on the edges of social differences.

The debate over the use of our military, and its role in foreign policy, is a topic that does merit the designation "culture war." Furthermore, the issue has caused many of the participants to break ranks and take positions that are against the majority of their political party or ideological fellows. This divisiveness may actually have a beneficial effect upon those involved, since it has served to break down some of the cultural walls built at the end of the 1960s. The passage of time will continue to erode those walls, and the end of the Cold War, while producing significant challenges, has already enabled the combatants in this "war" to find more and more common ground. As historian David Levy poignantly paraphrased Socrates:

> The differences between us that cannot be resolved, that "make us angry and set us at enmity with one another" are not usually about facts. Nor are they very often quarrels between a group of good people and a group of evil ones. . . . Our most serious differences arise from differing visions of what *is* good and what evil, from divergent definitions of the honorable and the dishonorable.[20]

NOTES

1. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), pp. 32-43. See also Francis Fukuyama, "The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1999, pp. 55-80.

2. Howard Brick, *The Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998.)

3. Paul Lyons, *New Left, New Right and the Legacy of the Sixties* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 181-86, 214-15.

4. David W. Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995), p. 170.

5. Ibid., pp. 169-71.

6. Ibid., pp. 172-73.

7. Ibid., pp. 174-75.

8. Michael Barone, "Wars and Remembrance," *U.S. News and World Report*, 12 April 1999, p. 24.

9. Ibid.

10. Patricia Cohen, "Ground Wars Make Strange Bedfellows," *The New York Times*, 30 May 1999, p. 5.

11. Irvin Molotsky, "War Protesters Keep Their Powder Dry," *The New York Times*, 2 May 1999, p. 5; and Alison Mitchell, "Vietnam Experience Unites Senators on Everything Except Kosovo," *The New York Times*, 23 April 1999, p. 12.

12. Cohen, p. 5.

13. Craig Whitney, "The Doves of Yesteryear Fly Off to a Different War," *The New York Times*, 18 April 1999, p. 1.

14. Cohen, p. 5.

15. Ibid. See also Fareed Zakaria, "Conservative Confusion On Kosovo," *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 April 1999, p. A26.

16. Sean Paige, "Sixties Doves as Nineties Hawks," *Insight*, 3 May 1999, p. 48.

17. Ibid., p. 48.

18. Whitney, p. 1.

19. Ibid.

20. Levy, p. 183.

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