



*"[We] all had grave objections to major U.S. ground force deployments," the White House's McGeorge Bundy wrote to Lyndon Johnson in July 1965, but, as Communist victory loomed in Vietnam, "[we] . . . moved from the mission of base security to the mission of active combat."*

# Vietnam as the Past

Were our Presidents right or wrong in involving the United States in Vietnam? Did our leaders adopt the best strategy for fighting the war? Did Hanoi wage a "revolutionary" struggle? How important was the American antiwar movement? What are Vietnam's lessons, and nonlessons, for today's U.S. policy-makers—and America's allies? As more documentation becomes available 10 years after the Nixon administration's "peace with honor," American historians have begun to supply some new answers. Their findings often challenge old clichés. Here Richard Betts analyzes U.S. entry into the war; Douglas Pike looks at the Communists' side; and Harry Summers re-examines the conduct of the war by America's leaders.

## MISADVENTURE REVISITED

*by Richard K. Betts*

Each November 22nd, representatives of the U.S. Army Special Forces—the Green Berets—join members of the Kennedy family at a memorial ceremony at President John F. Kennedy's grave. This joint tribute symbolizes the ambiguous legacy of the U.S. venture in Vietnam. Kennedy had personally championed the Green Berets as an elite vanguard combating Communist revolution and subversion in the Third World. But just four years after the President's assassination, his brothers Robert and Edward had moved into the vanguard of congressional opposition to this commitment.

Last autumn, there was an added irony; the Reagan administration had recently moved, as Kennedy did two decades ago, to re-emphasize the role of the Special Forces. The United States was once again speaking as if it would "pay any price, bear any burden" to oppose challenges to the free world.

To the extent that Ronald Reagan's assertive policy in El Salvador recalls the early period of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, it is useful to re-examine the White House assumptions, deliberations, and expectations of the 1960s. One finds lessons and nonlessons.

The U.S. commitment to South Vietnam was impelled by

---

the overarching post-1945 goal of "containing" Communist expansion, first in Europe, then, with the Korean War, in Asia.

In the case of Vietnam, a few critics in Washington and in academe quarreled with applying "containment" to a theater low in priority to the West. Indeed, scholar-diplomat George F. Kennan, the Soviet affairs specialist who had coined the term, was an early critic of the Johnson administration's involvement in Indochina. But not until late 1965, after Lyndon Baines Johnson started bombing North Vietnam and sent 184,000 troops to the South, did many in Congress, the press, the universities, or the politically sensitive public begin to doubt that South Vietnam was a vital testing ground in the global East-West struggle to keep the world safe for democracy.

By the time Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger gained the White House in 1969, the war had become a political fiasco; the whole notion of containment was under heavy attack. Disillusionment over Vietnam, Sino-American rapprochement, and high hopes for détente and arms control soon eroded the bipartisan constituency for maintaining a strong U.S. military presence overseas, even outside the Third World.\*But the reaction proved more transient than the consensus that led to Vietnam. As the Soviets or their allies advanced in Angola, Ethiopia, and Yemen, as revolutionary Iran humiliated the United States, and as Soviet troops went into Afghanistan, assertiveness slowly became popular again.

The U.S. experience in Vietnam will not inevitably repeat itself elsewhere, despite all the recent hue and cry over Central America. But it is worth examining what circumstances, beliefs, and judgments make Presidents and their advisers in Washington decide that in certain cases they have only one choice, and that they are better off enduring high costs rather than backing off from further engagement.

The United States became gradually involved in Indochina after 1950. Even before the outbreak of the Korean War, Presi-

---

\*In May 1971, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D.-Mont.) offered an amendment to a military draft bill that would have required the United States to withdraw one-half of its 300,000 troops in Europe as of December 31, 1971. After intense White House lobbying, the Senate defeated the amendment by a margin of 61-36.

---

*Richard K. Betts, 35, is Senior Fellow in foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution. Born in Easton, Pa., he received his Ph.D. in political science from Harvard University (1975). He is the author of Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises (1977) and the coauthor (with Leslie Gelb) of The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked (1979), which, along with later research, provided the basis for this essay.*



*In early 1968, LBJ meets with top aides (left to right): McNamara, Wheeler, Defense Secretary-designate Clark Clifford, National Security Adviser Walt Rostow, White House staffer Tom Johnson, Press Secretary George Christian, the CIA's Richard Helms, and Rusk.*

dent Harry S Truman began to take on the financial burden of the vain struggle by America's NATO ally, France, to defeat Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh, which was assisted by Communist China, America's foe in Korea. Dwight D. Eisenhower continued and increased that support, and committed the United States to the new regime in South Vietnam after French withdrawal. South Vietnam did not become a high U.S. priority until Kennedy's Presidency, and it did not become the highest overseas priority until the Johnson era.

The 1960s were, of course, a turning point, but not because Washington's goals changed. Ever since the Korean War, U.S. policy in Indochina had vacillated between contrary objectives—preventing a Communist takeover while avoiding American participation in a major war in Asia. Yet the contradiction between these two aims did not become acute until 1965. The efforts of Kennedy and Johnson differed in scale—the 1961 decision to increase the number of U.S. advisers (from 948 in November 1961 to 2,646 in January 1962) pales beside the 1965

decisions to bomb the North and to dispatch combat troops to the South. But in both cases, U.S. involvement grew dramatically in order to prevent imminent South Vietnamese collapse under Communist pressure and to shift momentum to the anti-Communist side. What was required to do this in 1961 was far less than what was required four years later.

All in all, Kennedy was less willing to disengage than later apologists suggested, and Johnson less deceptive about his goals and less anxious to escalate than later detractors believed. The notion that Kennedy intended to extricate the United States from South Vietnam after the 1964 U.S. election is belied by his actions right up to his death: a continuing build-up of aid and advisers, presidential reaffirmations\* that would have been gratuitous if he were looking forward to withdrawal, and prior endorsement of the 1963 Saigon coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem. Johnson's campaign rhetoric against Barry Goldwater in 1964 exploited public fears of war, but he never suggested that defeat would be an acceptable alternative.† And, although Johnson ordered contingency planning for direct U.S. military action before November 1964, he continued to search for alternatives *after* the election.

### Losing and Winning

Indeed, LBJ was a most reluctant warrior. Like his predecessor, he refused to accept any radical options proposed by subordinates that promised *victory*. Early in 1965, he authorized the bombing of North Vietnam, but only in limited, gradually increasing doses—not the quick and overwhelming effort sought by the Air Force. In July 1965, he ordered a build-up to 125,000 men in South Vietnam, despite the lack of promises of a long-term solution from Army leaders. In late 1965, Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara privately estimated that 600,000 U.S. troops (10 percent more than the highest level ever reached during the war) might be needed by 1967 and admitted that even that number “will not guarantee success.”

Once the air strikes against the North began, Johnson abste-

\*E.g., on September 12, 1963: “In some ways I think the Vietnamese people and ourselves agree: we want the war to be won, the Communists to be contained, and the Americans to go home . . . . But we are not there to see a war lost, and we will follow the policy which I have indicated today of advancing those causes and issues which help win the war.”

†In Akron, Ohio, on October 21, 1964, Johnson stated: “[We] are not about to send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.” But Johnson added that “we are going to assist them [the South Vietnamese] against attack as we have” in the past and “[we] will not permit the independent nations of the East to be swallowed up by Communist conquest.”

---

miously expanded them (rejecting military protests that such gradualism vitiated their effect) in consonance with his civilian advisers' hopes that mounting pressure might induce Hanoi to negotiate on U.S. terms.

As U.S. troop strength grew, General William C. Westmoreland's ground operations in the South expanded too, and soon, after Hanoi's spectacular but costly 1968 Tet Offensive, their cumulative effect—even if blunt and wasteful—forced the Communists, both regulars and guerrillas, onto the defensive and rolled back many of their earlier gains. But, in most circumstances, guerrillas win as long as they do not lose, and government forces lose as long as they do not win. And Hanoi, with its sanctuaries at home and its bases and routes of reinforcement in Laos and Cambodia, could keep from “losing” indefinitely. Colonel Harry G. Summers ruefully described his encounter in 1973, during negotiations on American MIAs (Missing-in-Action) in Hanoi, with a North Vietnamese officer who, confronted with the assertion that the Communists had never beaten U.S. troops in a major battle, replied, “That is correct. It is also irrelevant.”

In March 1967, Westmoreland told LBJ and McNamara that unless his forces were allowed to cut off Hanoi's infiltration of men and supplies, the war could continue indefinitely. Later in the year, despite their public optimism, Westmoreland and General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the President that with current U.S. troop levels, the war would continue as an indecisive “meat-grinder”; with a reinforcement of 95,000, it could drag on for three years; and with one of 195,000 (to a total of 665,000), it could last two years. Yet Johnson authorized an increase of only 55,000.

### A Quest for Compromise

Like JFK, LBJ chose a *limited* strategy. He chose to nibble the bullet rather than bite it. He feared provoking Chinese intervention and undertaking a full-scale war (or withdrawal) that could wreck his primary ambition: to build the Great Society.

Most important was his unwillingness to provoke a domestic political assault from either the Right (for “selling out” Vietnam) or the Left (for going too far militarily). In effect, he preferred to compromise on the battlefield and to suffer limited attacks at home from both ends of the political spectrum rather than face the full fury of either—although until the Tet Offensive, he feared the hawks more than the doves. A consensus-seeking, centrist political strategy drove the White House military policy. In this, too, Johnson's approach reflected that

**A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY**

1954-1975

1954 Geneva Accords end Indochina War between French and Viet Minh, dividing Vietnam into North and South. Eisenhower offers aid to South Vietnamese government.

1955 U.S. advisers take over training of South Vietnamese army (ARVN) from French. Diem becomes leader of South Vietnam.

1958 Growth of Communist guerrilla war against Diem regime.

1959 Hanoi decides to unify Vietnam by force, organizes Ho Chi Minh Trail infiltration routes to South Vietnam.



*Vo Nguyen Giap, Ho Chi Minh (1945)*

1960 Hanoi forms southern National Liberation Front (Viet Cong). Kennedy elected President.

1961 As Viet Cong pressure grows, JFK increases aid to Saigon, raises number of U.S. military advisers from 685 to 16,000—by late 1963.



*Ngo Dinh Diem (1955)*

1962 Soviet-American agreement in Geneva provides for "neutral" Laos, but does not end Hanoi's use of Ho Chi Minh Trail or CIA counterinsurgency effort.

1963 After suppressing Buddhist dissidents, Diem is ousted and killed by army; Kennedy assassinated; Johnson becomes President. McNamara notes Viet Cong gains after anti-Diem coup.



*John F. Kennedy (1962)*

1964 Hanoi starts sending regular army (PAVN) units to South. United States pledges assistance to South Vietnam as required to defeat "Communist aggression"; issues warnings to Hanoi. After clash between North Vietnamese PT boats and U.S. destroyers, Congress passes Tonkin Gulf Resolution supporting U.S. efforts to "prevent further aggression." Johnson elected President, as his Great Society gets under way. 23,000 U.S. advisers are in Vietnam.

1965 Communists batter ARVN; U.S. planes start bombing North Vietnam; Marines land at Da Nang to protect air base; Nguyen Cao Ky becomes Premier of South Vietnam; LBJ announces build-up to 125,000 men but refuses to call up reserves; Hanoi rejects U.S. offers to negotiate.

1966 U.S. Senate hearings on war policy; many antiwar demonstrations; Cultural Revolution in China; the *New York Times* reports from Hanoi on civilian damage caused by U.S. air strikes. Cambodia's Norodom Sihanouk secretly allows Hanoi to use Sihanoukville (Kompong Som) as supply port. War of attrition grinds on in South Vietnam. Filipinos, Australians, New Zealanders, South Koreans send troops.

**1967** Guam "summit": Westmoreland tells LBJ more decisive strategy is required to end the war, but LBJ does not respond. Johnson raises U.S. troop ceiling in South Vietnam to 525,000, calls for 10 percent surtax. Elections of Thieu and Ky. McNamara privately urges end of U.S. bombing and limit on U.S. manpower in Vietnam, resigns to become president of World Bank in 1968.

**1968** LBJ curbs most direct U.S. investment abroad and restricts overseas travel of U.S. citizens to cut growing balance-of-payments deficit. North Korea seizes *Pueblo*, U.S. Navy "spy ship." In Vietnam, Giap's forces besiege Khe Sanh, launch countrywide Tet Offensive and, later, "mini-Tet" attacks against Saigon. Eugene McCarthy, peace candidate, wins 42.4 percent of Democratic vote in New Hampshire presidential primary; Johnson receives 49.5 percent. LBJ orders partial bombing halt and announces he will not run for re-election; Hanoi agrees to peace talks in Paris. Clifford fixes 549,500-man U.S. troop ceiling and gradual transfer of war burden to South Vietnamese. LBJ ends all bombing of North. Nixon elected President with 43.4 percent of popular vote.



*Nguyen Van Thieu (1968)*

**1969** In "Vietnamization" effort, Nixon withdraws 68,000 troops during year; Ho Chi Minh dies; mass antiwar march in Washington. Peace talks continue.

**1970** Joint U.S.-South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia after Lon Nol coup ousts Sihanouk. Four protesters at Ohio's Kent State University are slain by National Guardsmen; students close 100 colleges.

**1971** South Vietnamese troops, with U.S. air support, invade southern Laos, in raid on Ho Chi Minh Trail. The *New York Times* begins publication of "Pentagon Papers." Re-election of Thieu. U.S. troop strength in Vietnam drops below 200,000. Congress votes to end draft in 1973.

**1972** U.S. election year. Equipped by Soviets, North Vietnamese launch massive tank-led Easter Offensive; Nixon orders mining of North Vietnam's ports and renews bombing. He attends summits in Beijing, Moscow. Watergate break-in. Hanoi's offensive stalls. Kissinger says "peace is at hand," but year ends with peace agreement unsigned. Nixon re-elected President, orders all-out "Christmas bombing" of Hanoi area to force North Vietnam back to Paris conference table.



*Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger (1970)*

**1973** Nixon halts all air operations against North Vietnam. After he privately assures Thieu that the United States will react with force to Communist violations, the United States, North and South Vietnam, and Viet Cong sign peace pact in Paris. In August, obeying Congress's mandate, United States ends bombing of Khmer Rouge insurgents in Cambodia, and thus all direct U.S. military intervention in Indochina. As Watergate disclosures engulf White House, Congress passes War Powers Act.

**1974** Both sides violate cease-fire in South Vietnam. U.S. Senate and House cut back military aid to Saigon requested by Nixon. In August, climaxing Watergate scandal, Nixon resigns as President, and is succeeded by Gerald Ford.

**1975** Communists triumph in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. North Vietnamese take Phuoc Long province against feeble resistance, then open Great Spring Offensive that routs South Vietnamese forces and ends with capture of Saigon. Americans help 150,000 escape. Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge capture Phnom Penh, begin massacres across Cambodia. Pro-Hanoi Pathet Lao forces occupy Vientiane, Laos's capital. Peace.





Under Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, senior policy-makers in Washington were seldom deluded that the odds of routing the Communists in Vietnam were high. Indeed, in most cases, they increased U.S. deployments of men and/or firepower simply to stave off defeat, with no real expectation of victory. What made the men in Washington believe that they were making efforts that with luck might pan out, rather than marching *inevitably* toward defeat?

### The Iron Combination

The answer lies between hubris and hope. During the early 1960s, both civilian and military theorists of "counterinsurgency" promoted the fateful illusion that American tutelage could reshape the fragile, war-battered South Vietnamese political system, creating a new nationalism among the South Vietnamese that could confront Marxist revolutionary élan with some sort of vigorous Asian Jeffersonianism—through land reform, free elections, better government.

Some U.S. "pacification" techniques proved successful—in the short term. For all their much-publicized deficiencies, the sheer weight of allied manpower and economic resources produced major gains in rural prosperity, population control, and road security during the years between Tet and the 1972 Easter Offensive. Increasingly unable to enlist new recruits, the southern Communist guerrillas (Viet Cong) were ground down by attrition; North Vietnamese forces took over the chief burden of combat. Large-scale *conventional* North Vietnamese attacks, with bases in Laos and Cambodia, rather than Viet Cong guerrilla insurgency, brought on the 1975 collapse of the Saigon regime.

Even more important was limited war theory,\* an outgrowth of opposition to the Eisenhower administration's post-Korea "massive retaliation" policy. The focus was on using measured doses of force to induce an adversary to negotiate and to compromise. The 1965–67 air war against North Vietnam exposed the holes in some versions of the theory. The Pentagon civilians who had designed the air war originally expected to "calibrate" the U.S. response to each enemy provocation and to use incremental pressure to convince Hanoi to desist. This aim was inevitably subverted by practical difficulties—targeting, timing, communications—that derailed Washington's "orches-

\*Its chief academic proponents were Robert Osgood and Thomas Schelling; their views found many echoes in the Army, notably in writings by Generals Maxwell Taylor (*The Uncertain Trumpet*, 1959) and James Gavin (*War and Peace in the Space Age*, 1959).

---

tration" of words and deeds.

Most of all, the theory foundered because its proponents vastly underestimated Hanoi's determination and overestimated the basis for a negotiated compromise. The Vietnam War was primarily a civil war, and, overall, a struggle involving *incompatible* ideologies and visions of society, not just a proxy conflict between great powers over influence in a third area. Both American leaders and their critics in Congress and the press found this reality hard to understand. As Kissinger reflected with hindsight,

Because the United States had become great by assimilating men and women of different beliefs, we had developed an ethic of tolerance; having had little experience with unbridgeable schisms, our mode of settling conflicts was to seek a solution somewhere between the contending positions. But to the Vietnamese this meant that we were not serious about what we put forward and that we treated them as frivolous. They had not fought for forty years to achieve a compromise.

Professional military men never agreed with the civilians' game-theory logic. Yet, with few exceptions, until 1968 both military and civilian leaders in Washington assumed that South Vietnam *had* to be saved. The United States could not just walk out on its ally. The disputes, seldom publicized, were over means, not ends.

Only if President Johnson, McNamara, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk had known for *sure* in early 1965 that "graduated pressure" would fail and that the most pessimistic military estimates of what would be required to bend Hanoi's will were correct would there have been a chance for a White House decision to disengage. Like Kennedy, Johnson distrusted the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Some of his civilian lieutenants viewed bleak JCS estimates or pleas for "decisive" strategies as "worst-case" ploys designed to maximize their options and to protect their reputations in case of failure.

This tragic misjudgment aside, the fact remains that LBJ & Co. knew that gradually building up U.S. strength in Vietnam offered no assurance of victory. Yet at each juncture until Tet 1968, they saw no alternative to pressing on, *hoping* that the Politburo in Hanoi would grow weary and negotiate.

The air war strategy was flawed, but the details of its rationale fade in significance beside the overarching White House decision in 1965 to keep the war effort, as a whole, limited. Ex-

---

cept for the military, who did not protest in public, there were virtually no officials in the executive branch—and few newspaper editors or legislators—who in 1965 questioned the premise of limitation.

The tragedy stemmed from the iron combination of this consensus with the premise that the war still had to be fought.

The one high-ranking official who opposed escalation was Under Secretary of State George W. Ball. Beginning in 1963, he argued that Vietnam was of secondary importance, and that our commitment there drained resources away from NATO. LBJ's negative reaction was ironic, since the initial U.S. involvement in Indochina was spurred by the priority of NATO—to support France in the early 1950s even though Washington had no love for colonialism. But not until 1965, after the first Marines went ashore at Da Nang in March, did Ball recommend outright withdrawal.

In 1964–65, Congress was quite complaisant; only Senate mavericks like Wayne L. Morse (D.-Ore.) and Ernest H. Gruening (D.-Alaska) opposed crucial decisions of the mid-1960s. When J. W. Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, turned against the war in 1966, he was still countered by colleagues of equal rank such as John C. Stennis, chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

There was little early active support for Johnson administration policy on Capitol Hill, but, contrary to myth, even well after Tet, nearly all congressional war foes, from Edward M. Kennedy (D.-Mass.) to George S. McGovern (D.-S.D.) issued calls for faster troop withdrawals and greater concessions in peace talks, *not* for unconditional U.S. withdrawal. Though opposition on Capitol Hill mounted with time, it was not until *after* U.S. troops had been withdrawn and the POWs returned in 1973 that the raft of legislation was passed constraining both presidential war powers and aid to the South Vietnamese ally.

### Running Out of Time

In short, the remarkable American consensus behind the initial intervention, from 1961 to the 1968 Tet Offensive, has been obscured in retrospect by the force of later disillusionment. Only *after* it became clear that the cost of prolonged U.S. intervention in Vietnam was prohibitive did it begin to seem to large segments of Congress, the media, and academe that the alternative, a Communist victory in South Vietnam, was not so grave a disaster (for America). But by that time, compromises that had seemed radical during the Johnson administration seemed in-

### THE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT, THE NEW LEFT, AND PUBLIC OPINION

On March 31, 1968, President Lyndon Baines Johnson announced on TV that he would not seek re-election. "With America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home," he could not both serve as the nation's wartime Commander-in-Chief and fight the partisan battles of a political campaign.

The growing antiwar movement claimed credit for Johnson's decision. But did its efforts hasten the war's end? Probably not.

Mild dissent first surfaced in 1964–65. A few prominent intellectuals, notably Hans J. Morgenthau, argued that the Free World's interests in South Vietnam did not justify a massive expenditure of U.S. blood and treasure. Said columnist Walter Lippmann in July 1965, "We can search the globe and look in vain for true and active supporters of our policy." Liberal doves—Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Richard H. Rovere, the *New York Times's* John Oakes—variously called for bombing halts, cease-fires, and talks leading to a coalition regime in Saigon that would include the southern National Liberation Front (Viet Cong), which, some of these writers suggested, enjoyed autonomy from Hanoi.

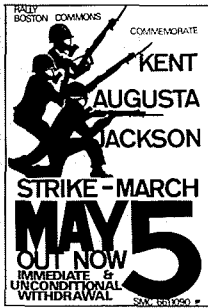
New Left intellectuals demanded much more. Besides condemning LBJ, the U.S. military, and South Vietnamese leaders, they cheered on Ho Chi Minh. Visiting Hanoi in 1968, the *New York Review of Books's* Susan Sontag discovered "an ethical society" whose government "loves the people." Her hosts' only defect was that they "aren't good enough haters"; Hanoi's jailers "genuinely care about the welfare of the hundreds of captured American pilots. . . ." No less impressed was novelist Mary McCarthy, who concluded that Prime Minister Pham Van Dong presided over "a moral, ascetic government, concerned above all with the *quality* of Vietnamese life." And MIT's Noam Chomsky described his own country as "the most aggressive power in the world"; he urged "a kind of denazification" of U.S. leaders.

More widespread was a larger movement centered at first in the elite universities. As higher draft calls came in 1966–67, such groups as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) conducted "teach-ins" on college campuses and then mounted protest rallies in cities across the nation. Against such opposition, Lyndon Johnson's failure to offer "a convincing moral justification" for the U.S. war effort, *Commentary's* Norman Podhoretz argued in 1982, doomed his quest for stronger support at home.

Yet through most of the 1960s, nearly two-thirds of the public, judging by polls, favored a continuation or intensification of the struggle. The Vietnam War, political scientist John E. Mueller has shown, only became more unpopular (in September 1969) than the Korean War after U.S. casualties in Vietnam had substantially surpassed those of the earlier, shorter conflict (see charts, pp. 112–113).

Moreover, Mueller argues, the protesters' disruptive style was in some ways self-defeating. In a 1968 poll by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research in which the public was asked to rate various groups on a 100-point scale, one-third gave antiwar protesters a zero, while only 16 percent put them anywhere in the upper half of the scale.

The dramatic efforts of antiwar Democrats to elect presidential peace candidates gained only Pyrrhic victories. The surprising 42.2 percent vote that Senator Eugene J. McCarthy won in the party's 1968 New Hampshire primary largely reflected "anti-Johnson" rather than "antiwar" sentiment. Among McCarthy voters, hawks outnumbered doves by nearly three to two. Moreover, the Democratic Left, Mueller contends, "helped to elect Richard Nixon twice": in 1968, by convincing a sufficient number of disaffected liberals to sit out the election and give Nixon a narrow victory over Hubert H. Humphrey, and in 1972, by securing the Democratic nomination for a landslide loser, Senator George S. McGovern.



The antiwar movement crested in 1969–70, as moderate Democrats, notably Humphrey and Edmund S. Muskie, came out against what was now Richard Nixon's war. But when the last great Washington protest march occurred in April 1971, the heteroge-

neous antiwar coalition was already fragmenting into a number of single-issue groups, notably feminists, environmentalists, homosexuals. And as draft calls dwindled with Nixon's gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam, campus unrest noticeably subsided.

The Vietnam conflict did not cause the "cultural revolution" of the late 1960s in America (and Western Europe). "If there had been no Vietnam War, we would have invented one," Yippie leader Jerry Rubin wrote in 1970. Rather, the war came to represent all that dissident groups believed was wrong with the United States: It offered, in Sontag's words, "the key to a systematic criticism of America."

In the end, as Mueller suggests, antiwar protest (and congressional outcries) inhibited administration policy-makers, but it was not decisive. It may have prompted Nixon to speed up U.S. troop withdrawals, to pull back from his 1970 incursion into Cambodia earlier than planned, and to join Democrats in ending the draft. It did not prevent him from bombing the North in 1972. Congress adopted the most consequential antiwar measure, the restrictive War Powers Act of 1973, well after street protest had faded.

Still, most scholars agree, the disarray of the Vietnam era brought one long-term consequence: It helped to shatter the U.S. foreign policy consensus forged during the early Cold War, greatly complicating the task of later Presidents in defending U.S. interests abroad.

---

sufficient. As Kissinger recounts:

By August of 1969 we had offered or undertaken unilaterally all of the terms of the 1968 *dove* plank of the Democrats (which had been defeated in Chicago). We had exceeded the promises of the Republican platform, expecting by our demonstration of flexibility to foster moderation in Hanoi and unity at home. We were naively wrong in both expectations.

The American effort in 1965–72 was not subverted by moral objections (such objections remained those of a minority even to the end), but by a gradually building public perception that all the blood and treasure was simply being *wasted* to no visible end. The United States may be able to fight a major limited war again, say, in the Persian Gulf, but only if it is not long and inconclusive. As Harvard's Samuel P. Huntington observed: "The most crucial limitation . . . is not the limitation on weapons or geographical scope or goals, but rather the limitation on *time*."

Wide recognition of such U.S. political realities reinforces the military's argument against limitations on the use of conventional forces. But this recognition provides no guarantee against future mistakes. The necessary scale and duration of successful military operations can never be known for sure in advance. What the Vietnam record shows is that Washington's top decision-makers knew in 1964–65 that, given the limits they imposed on U.S. strategy, victory would not come quickly, if it came at all. A similar prognosis by the White House in a future case, with the Vietnam experience in mind, could produce a presidential choice between a decisive hard-hitting use of force or no military intervention at all.

### Hindsight Is Easier

Should future U.S. ventures overseas be undertaken only if a cut-off point is decided in advance? Political scientist Richard Neustadt has criticized the White House National Security Council staff in 1964–65 for not seriously addressing "the option of getting out of Vietnam . . . . It was always taken to be unacceptable on the face of it." Doing this, however, is politically dangerous; any leak to the press about such a study would surely subvert the commitment's support and credibility.

White House decisions on what is vital to U.S. interests abroad are affected by limited information and by official perceptions that may not be known to be—or may not *be*—incor-

---

rect until later. For example, as Rusk was wont to explain, part of the rationale for sending U.S. troops to South Vietnam was to prevent Chinese advances further into Southeast Asia. The problem was not simply an obtuse U.S. failure to recognize the Sino-Soviet split. Despite their dispute, Moscow and Beijing were seen in Washington as having parallel interests in promoting violent Communist revolution. Because a Sino-American rapprochement occurred during the 1970s does not mean that it could have happened during the 1960s—before the 1969 Soviet-Chinese border clashes and before Soviet hints of a future preventive attack on China's new nuclear facilities pushed Beijing toward accommodation with Washington.

### **A Yearning in Washington**

Moreover, the President does not act in a vacuum. Had North Korea, armed by the Soviets, not attacked South Korea in 1950 (shaking Washington into revision of judgments about whether Communist leaders would resort to armed conquest), Truman might have felt no urge to become more involved in support of the French in Indochina. Had Eisenhower not just concluded the Korean War and scored anti-Communist successes in Iran and Guatemala, he might not have felt secure enough in 1954 to accept the partition of Vietnam (though his acceptance resulted in a U.S. commitment to the new regime in the South). Had Kennedy not experienced the unsettling Vienna summit with Nikita Khrushchev, the Bay of Pigs, a new Berlin crisis, and setbacks in Laos—all in 1961—he might have felt he had more leeway in avoiding a major increase in the U.S. advisory effort in South Vietnam later that year.

The crucial phase of any overseas commitment is the formative period, when presidential rhetoric becomes mortgaged and initial costs are sunk. Yet during this early phase, the long-range consequences are least certain and the commitment is a secondary matter, rather than the centerpiece it may become later as U.S. involvement and costs accumulate. When costs are still limited, the alternative seems bleaker than when the commitment burgeons into full-blown national sacrifice.

John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and lesser policymakers during the 1960s faced these pressures and ambiguities and decided that a gamble in South Vietnam was preferable to the alternative; uncertain prospects of victory were better than certain prospects of defeat. The results make clear the folly of this judgment.

By 1975, the dominant "lesson" was that Washington



---

should take no risks, that it should not begin messy involvements in the Third World if there is *any* danger that they cannot be concluded without considerable sacrifice. Despite President Jimmy Carter's creation of a much-publicized Rapid Deployment Force in 1979–80, the lesson still has a powerful hold. In 1983, Congress has shown little enthusiasm for the Reagan administration's modest efforts to counter Marxist guerrillas in Central America, and none at all for direct combat involvement of U.S. military men, even as advisers. Yet "containment," in theory at least, has been reinvigorated. Reagan's rhetoric recalls the staunchness of the New Frontier. The Pentagon speaks of a global "maritime strategy."

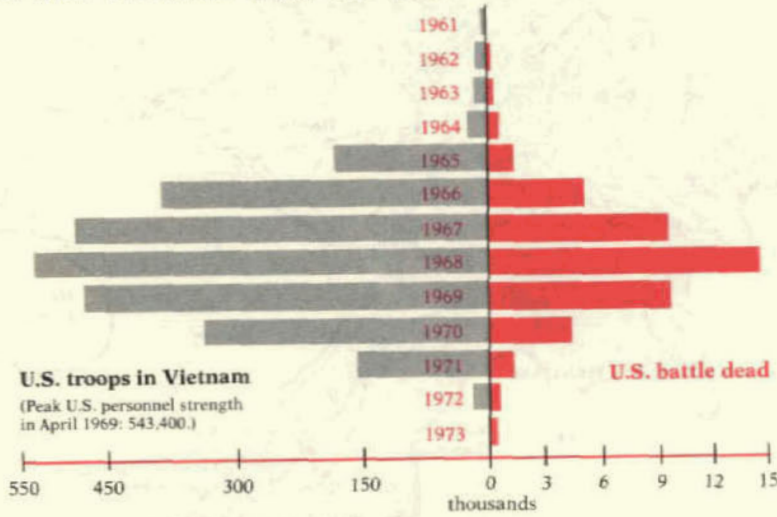
What has not rebounded to the same degree is the bipartisan consensus among politicians and in the press behind containment. If anything, there seems to be a yearning in Reagan's Washington for the containment of the Eisenhower years, to bestride the globe and confront Soviet power without spilling blood, to be strong but at peace, to support anti-Communist allies or clients with money and arms but not men, all without raising the spectre of war.

Dwight Eisenhower could accomplish all that because the predicament that his successors faced—imminent collapse of the whole row of Indochina dominoes—did not develop while he was in office. We know more now, but we still do not know how a disastrous war could have been avoided except at the price foreseen in 1961 as in 1965—apparently disastrous defeat. John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson were wrong in moving into Vietnam on so grand a scale, but neither was wrong in thinking that his failure to do so could produce unpleasant reactions at home and abroad. Now, as then, neither containment nor disengagement is risk-free.

---

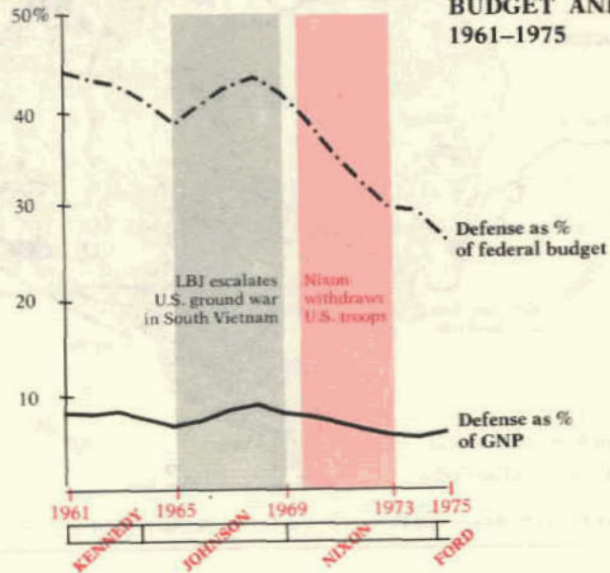


**YEAR-END U.S. TROOP STRENGTH AND BATTLE DEAD IN THE VIETNAM WAR, 1961-1973**

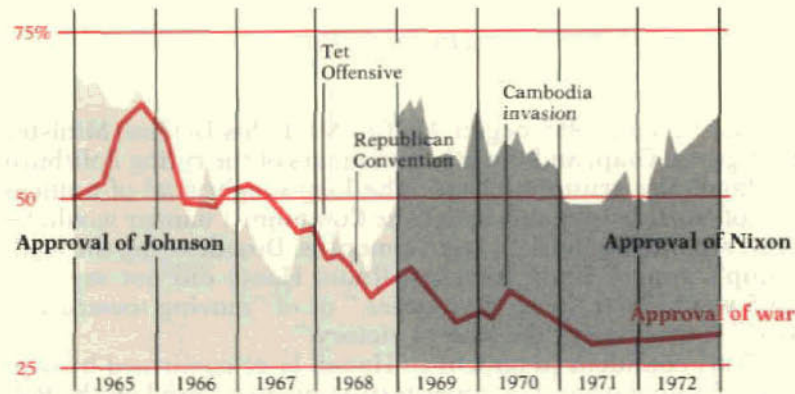


*57,717 U.S. servicemen had died by the end of 1973: 47,268 in battle, 10,449 from other causes. Defense spending as a percentage of both the U.S. budget and Gross National Product declined long before the war ended.*

**DEFENSE SPENDING AS A PERCENTAGE OF FEDERAL BUDGET AND GNP 1961-1975**

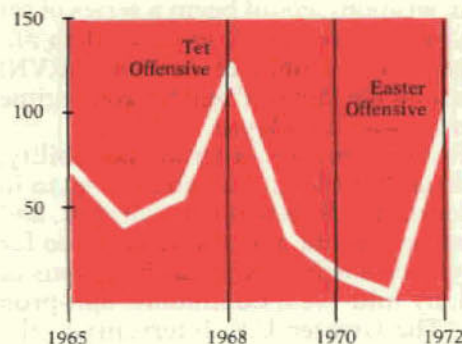


## POPULAR SUPPORT FOR VIETNAM WAR AND TWO PRESIDENTS

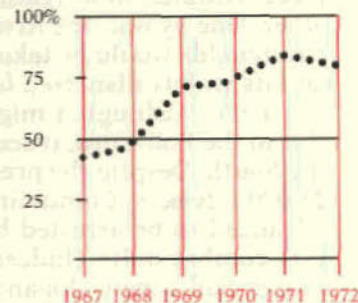


The Gallup poll questions (above) were: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way (the incumbent President) is handling his job?" and "Do you think the United States made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?" Answers to the "mistake" question do not indicate policy preferences, e.g., escalation or withdrawal. Americans reacted similarly to the Korean War (See WQ, Summer '78). Ironically, the erosion of U.S. popular support coincided with a long decline in enemy battalion-size (400- to 500-man) attacks after the 1968 Tet Offensive. After Tet, the percentage of South Vietnamese in relatively "secure" areas, as measured by (uncertain) U.S. statistics, rose steadily until 1972, when Hanoi launched its Easter Offensive.

## COMMUNIST BATTALION-SIZE ATTACKS, 1965-1972



## PERCENT OF SOUTH VIETNAM'S POPULATION IN 'SECURE' AREAS, 1967-1972



Source: U.S. Department of Defense; *The Budget of the U.S. Government*, 1970 and 1977, Government Printing Office; John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, 1978; *Journal of Defense Research*, Series B, Fall 1975.

## THE OTHER SIDE

*by Douglas Pike*

As the year 1965 began, Ho Chi Minh, his Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap, and the other members of the ruling Politburo in Hanoi saw triumph ahead. The long-sought goal of unification of North and South under the Communist banner would be achieved during the next twelve months. Broadcasting the leadership's annual State message, Radio Hanoi did not say that 1965 would be a "year of victories," or of "moving toward victory." It said flatly "the year of victory."

This confident judgment in Hanoi, later confirmed by captured documents and prisoner testimony, was based on the Politburo's survey of the battlefield in South Vietnam and its interpretations of Washington's capabilities. All in all, it was not an unrealistic estimate.

Outside Saigon, Da Nang, and the South's other major cities, the People's Liberation Armed Forces (Viet Cong) regulars were chewing up, one by one, the South Vietnamese government's dozen mobile reserve battalions of paratroopers and marines as they were sent in with American advisers to rescue local garrisons under attack. Soon the Saigon regime, its faction-ridden military and political leadership in chronic disarray since the 1963 overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem, would have no reserves to spare.

At that point, the Viet Cong, evolving, under Hanoi's control, into regular regiments and divisions equipped with mortars, rockets, and automatic weapons, could begin a series of set piece assaults, first against one isolated city or base, then another. One by one, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) strongholds would be taken, and the demoralized Saigon regime and its widely dispersed forces would collapse.

That Washington might intervene was a strong possibility. But to the Politburo, it seemed that the rot had already set in in the South. Despite the presence of U.S. helicopters, aircraft, and 23,000 advisers, Communist battlefield gains were now too far advanced to be arrested by necessarily piecemeal injections of U.S. combat units. (Indeed, by mid-1965, Communist agit-prop cadres had a new slogan: "The Greater U.S. Intervention, the Greater U.S. Defeat.") The Viet Cong continued to hit U.S. advisers' barracks, airfields—and the U.S. embassy in Saigon.

Sporadic American air strikes had already begun (in mid-



*North Vietnamese farmers, with water buffalo, wend their way home from rice fields. To wage war, Hanoi depended on massive Soviet aid.*

1964) against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. Lyndon Johnson ordered retaliatory bombing of the North in August 1964 after the Gulf of Tonkin encounter between North Vietnamese patrol boats and U.S. Navy destroyers. (Yet to come were the regular, but still limited, "Rolling Thunder" bombing raids that began in February.) As the North Vietnamese leaders saw it, provision by the Soviet Union of modern air defense radar and weaponry would blunt the impact of any U.S. air effort, although the North would still have to take heavy punishment.

Had the men in Hanoi adhered to this assessment, rather than losing confidence and switching strategy, the year 1965 might well have been the year of Communist victory.

However, by mid-March 1965, with the landing of 3,500 U.S. Marines to defend Da Nang air base, the ever-cautious Giap began to hedge his bets. He did not press for an all-out effort to win the war before the Americans were in South Vietnam in force, although he had already started moving regiments of the North Vietnamese Army (People's Army of Vietnam or PAVN) south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1964. Instead, he spent the first six months of 1965 in what, in effect, was a holding operation. His calculation was that he faced a new war against a new

---

enemy that required new tactics and a readapted grand strategy. This decision, coupled with the psychological lift given to Saigon by the American intervention, served to pull the South Vietnamese out of the jaws of defeat.

The actual onset of the sustained U.S. bombing of the North, despite confident-sounding Communist public pronouncements, engendered enormous apprehension in Hanoi. The French, during the 1945–54 Indochina War, had been able to employ only a feeble air arm (some 100 combat aircraft); the Americans had more than 1,000 fighter-bombers available, plus the B-52 bomber with its 30-ton bomb-load.

Yet the American bombing efforts during 1965–68 were (by Washington's orders) sharply delimited, confined mostly to roads, bridges, power plants, barracks, supply dumps. The B-52s were not used. Hanoi was off-limits. So were North Vietnam's major Mig fighter bases, such as Phuc Yen (until 1967), and the key port facilities of Haiphong.

Among the North Vietnamese leaders the belief grew, and then became entrenched, that, aided by increasingly sophisticated Soviet-provided missiles and other weaponry, the North was absorbing the *worst* punishment that the United States could deliver. This view persisted until the shock of Richard Nixon's all-out "Christmas bombing" campaign of 1972, which was followed by the Paris peace agreement of January 1973.\*

As 1965 wore on, and American ground strength grew in the South, Giap decided (despite contrary advice from some Politburo colleagues) to meet the United States head-on. No longer applicable, he later wrote, were the techniques which had worked for the Communists against the French (and the ARVN): the regimental ambush, the entrapment of mobile units, the isolation and destruction of enemy garrisons, the slow, steady gain of territory and population. The Americans had enormous fire-

---

\*In my view, this sequence suggests that a similar "all-out" bombing effort in early 1965 could well have prompted Hanoi's leaders to negotiate an agreement, then sought by Lyndon Johnson, providing for a cease-fire and mutual withdrawal of Northern forces and U.S. troops from South Vietnam. Such an accord, of course, would not have ended Hanoi's quest for unification; it would simply have brought a change in tactics and a new timetable.

---

*Douglas Pike, 57, is director of the Indochina Archive at the University of California at Berkeley. Born in Cass Lake, Minn., he received his B.A. at the University of California at Berkeley (1953) and his M.A. at American University (1959). He is the author of Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (1966), History of Vietnamese Communism, 1925–1976 (1978), and Vietnam and the USSR: A Study of Geopolitical Relations (forthcoming).*

---

power (fighter-bombers, artillery, helicopter gunships), superb communications, and the ability, lacked by the road-bound French, to move troops rapidly by helicopter and air transport.

For his part, Giap had some long-term advantages. Geography, the implications of which were usually overlooked by American pundits and politicians, was on his side. The Saigon government (and the newly arrived Americans) had more than 600 miles of open border to protect and more than 16 million people to defend in an area the size of Washington state, with 44 provincial capitals, 241 district towns, and upwards of 15,000 hamlets that were all vulnerable to terrorism and guerrilla attack. Jungle and mountains covered more than half the country.

### **Just Us Southerners**

In such terrain, the Viet Cong had long enjoyed secure bases and rest areas: These in turn were linked to "sanctuaries" in southern Laos and eastern Cambodia, tied to the Ho Chi Minh Trail transit routes from the North. According to recent North Vietnamese accounts, it took cadres and military replacements six months to traverse the trail when it was first organized in 1959; its roadnet was steadily improved, despite U.S. bombing, after 1965 and soon accommodated well-organized truck traffic and, by 1972, tanks. The trail was the key to Giap's war.

To support Communist forces in the Mekong Delta and north of Saigon, Hanoi also secured (in 1966) secret permission from Prince Norodom Sihanouk of "neutral" Cambodia to use Sihanoukville (now Kompong Som) as a supply port.

Lastly, the North ("the Great Rear") was bombed but not blockaded or invaded. Soviet freighters unloaded SAM missiles, tanks, Moltava trucks, and artillery at Haiphong. From neighboring China came light weapons, ammunition, and rice. U.S. air strikes could slow but not halt these goods—and North Vietnamese reinforcements—on their way to the battlefield.

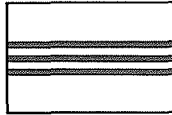
The ruling Lao Dong (Workers') Party also had strong human assets. A decade after victory over the French, Ho Chi Minh, Giap, Party Secretary Le Duan, Premier Pham Van Dong, and their colleagues commanded a Spartan, highly organized party, purged of dissenters, led by a generation of cadres tested in war, and convinced that "unification" of North and South under Hanoi's rule was a "golden" objective worthy of any sacrifice.

There were periods in the North of low morale and discontent, of malingering and petty corruption, as party documents made clear. But the iron grip of the party cadres and the society's own strong discipline and ethnocentrism sustained the war



### THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE

By Third World standards, the easygoing Saigon government of 1954–75 was as efficient as most, and far less repressive than many, notably the ruthless regime in Hanoi. Given a peaceful post-colonial decade or two, and some good leadership, the Republic of Vietnam might have developed into a fairly prosperous, stable nation like, say, Malaysia or Thailand.



But there was no peace. And neither Ngo Dinh Diem, the South's first Chief of State (1954–63), nor its last, Nguyen Van Thieu (1965–75), was a bold leader. Each suffered from personal insecurity, caution, and remoteness from ordinary South Vietnamese. Neither was able—or willing—to build broad-based political support outside the French-educated urban middle class. As a result, Army generals, themselves divided by rivalries, were the arbiters of South Vietnam's turbulent politics.

To stay in power, Thieu, himself a general, felt compelled to pick senior commanders on the basis of loyalty first, honesty and competence second. As one ARVN officer told the *New York Times* in 1975, "The generals amassed riches for their families, but the soldiers got nothing and saw no moral sanction in their leadership." In one year (1966), more than one-fifth of ARVN's soldiers deserted—not to the Viet Cong but to go home.

Land reform did not come until 1970. The war ravaged entire districts, notably in Quang Ngai and Hau Nghia provinces; overall, 1.2

effort, allowing General Giap repeatedly to suffer enormous losses (perhaps 900,000 dead by 1973), then to rebuild PAVN units for yet another battle. "The North Vietnamese," observed Laos's French-educated Premier Souvanna Phouma in 1967, "are the Prussians of Southeast Asia."

What drew most attention in Washington during 1961–65 were the guerrillas in the South, whose early local cadres were Viet Minh veterans of the French war. One of the myths fostered by Hanoi and accepted by many Westerners was that the National Liberation Front (NLF), or Viet Cong, was an independent creation set up by Southerners in 1960 to combat the injustices of the Diem regime and allied to, but independent of, Hanoi.

In fact, Hanoi decided in May 1959 at the 15th Party Plenum to reunify the North and the South by force. The 559 Unit was established to develop the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam through "neutral" Laos and Cambodia for southbound political and military cadres; by Hanoi's own recent account, some

million refugees were generated between late 1965 and mid-1967 alone. And each year, the Viet Cong kidnapped or assassinated thousands of village chiefs, schoolteachers, relief workers.

Yet, despite official corruption, lackluster leadership, and severe hardships, the South Vietnamese people never went over en masse to the revolution. No ARVN unit defected to the foe. According to political scientist Samuel Popkin, the Communists' costly 1968 Tet Offensive (and their massacre of civilians in occupied Hue) discredited two Viet Cong propaganda themes: inevitable victory and a happy future under Communist rule. After Tet, Saigon belatedly organized more than two million civilians into local armed self-defense groups. By war's end, more than 220,000 South Vietnamese soldiers and militiamen had died to defend their country.

The massive U.S. presence from 1965 to 1973 both helped and hindered the South Vietnamese. American troops, advisers, and firepower offset Hanoi's advantages and staved off defeat—but encouraged Saigon's psychological dependence on the Yanks. Washington decried Saigon's shortcomings but did not insist on solutions. The unilateral withdrawal of their powerful but war-weary ally in 1973—and later U.S. aid cuts—demoralized Thieu, his troops, and his best commanders. Left alone to face the Northerners, the South was fated to succumb.

"We small nations can end up losing high stakes [by counting on U.S. pledges of support]," observed Bui Diem, former Ambassador to Washington, on the 10th anniversary of the Paris peace accords. "You can . . . say 'Well, it is an unhappy chapter [in] American history.' But that is not the same . . . for the South Vietnamese."

20,000 men moved South during the first few years to help organize and lead the Viet Cong insurgency.

The NLF changed after Diem's overthrow in 1963. Northerners took over the organization with unification under *Hanoi's* leadership as the main aim. The NLF's public face was Southern; it issued its own communiqués, had its own representatives abroad. Hanoi always refused to admit it had troops in the South. But, remembering the 1954 division of Vietnam, Hanoi kept a tight leash on the NLF. Northerners, or northern-trained Southerners, directed most major military operations and held the key political party posts. (Hanoi kept similar control over the Communist Pathet Lao forces in Laos.)

Reviving the old Viet Minh techniques—propaganda, indoctrination, "selective terrorism," and tight organization—drew rural recruits and cowed local government officials. With its networks of agents, tax collectors, and porters, the Viet Cong was stronger in some provinces (usually those where the Viet

---

Minh had been active during 1945–54) than in others. It was unsuccessful in enlisting significant support from dissident Buddhist factions, urban workers, the ethnic Chinese or the *montagnard* (hill) tribesmen. Even so, thanks to the administrative chaos that followed Diem's ouster, the NLF was able to make steady progress, recruiting and sustaining 85,000 well-armed regulars and 115,000 paramilitary local troops by 1966.

Giap used all these assets as he experimented with PAVN thrusts against U.S. units in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965 and below the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) against the Marines in 1966–67, with a view toward devising a winning strategy. At the same time, he used Viet Cong battalions to fight allied forays into contested areas and to raid allied outposts and district towns. These tactics variously eased or interrupted the growing allied pressures against the elusive local Viet Cong and inflicted losses, but they did not end the steady attrition of the guerrillas. Nor did Giap, taking heavy casualties, succeed in overrunning a U.S. defensive position or destroying a major U.S. unit.

#### America As Domino

By mid-1967, Giap had completed his strategic experimentation. He then launched the most important campaign of the war, the winter-spring campaign of 1967–68. Giap combined "coordinated fighting methods"—set piece battles with his main force regiments, usually on battlefields close to his bases in Cambodia or Laos—with "independent fighting methods"—simultaneous small-scale attacks all over the country—to launch a "continuous comprehensive offensive." After his usual lengthy build-up of men and supplies, he combined these assaults with a major political effort. The chief aim was to collapse the Saigon regime's administrative apparatus and its 650,000-man armed forces, thereby undermining the whole U.S. effort.

The climax neared as two PAVN divisions lay siege to the U.S. Marines' outpost at Khe Sanh, near Laos. Then, in what is now called the 1968 Tet (or lunar new year) Offensive, Saigon, Hue, and 100 other places were hit on January 30–31. Some 84,000 troops, mostly in Viet Cong units, were committed in the first assaults. Agents were sent to urban areas to promote a "general uprising" by the inhabitants against the Thieu regime.

Just as the allies underestimated Giap's boldness, so Giap overestimated the Saigon government's weaknesses and the popularity of the Viet Cong; his intelligence agents may have erroneously equated urban complaints against the Thieu regime and the Americans with pro-Viet Cong "revolutionary" senti-

ment. In any event, no general uprising occurred. ARVN fought back. Khe Sanh held. Even as Washington was shaken, the Saigon regime, buttressed by U.S. aid and advisers, coped with one million new refugees and muddled through. And in and around the cities, the Viet Cong lost heavily, exposed for the first time to the full weight of allied firepower. Truong Nhu Tang, one of the NLF's founders now in exile, observed: "The truth was that Tet cost us half of our forces. Our losses were so immense that we were simply unable to replace them with new recruits."\*

This military failure was followed up by a weaker "second wave" attack in May, coinciding with the onset of peace talks in Paris. North Vietnamese regulars and local Viet Cong battalions struck at Saigon and several other points. This effort failed, too, although Saigon was penetrated, with heavy urban damage.

By mid-1968, Giap, a better logistician than tactician, was back on the defensive. Against the strong allied effort to take territory and population away from the now-weakened Viet Cong, he made few countermoves. He did on occasion, during 1969-71, launch what the allies called "high points"—simultaneous attacks by sappers and rocket teams against several dozen bases and towns—but these employed mostly local forces. He launched a few thrusts in border areas. But he usually kept his big units in base camps in, or close to, eastern Laos and Cambodia, as his engineers kept developing the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

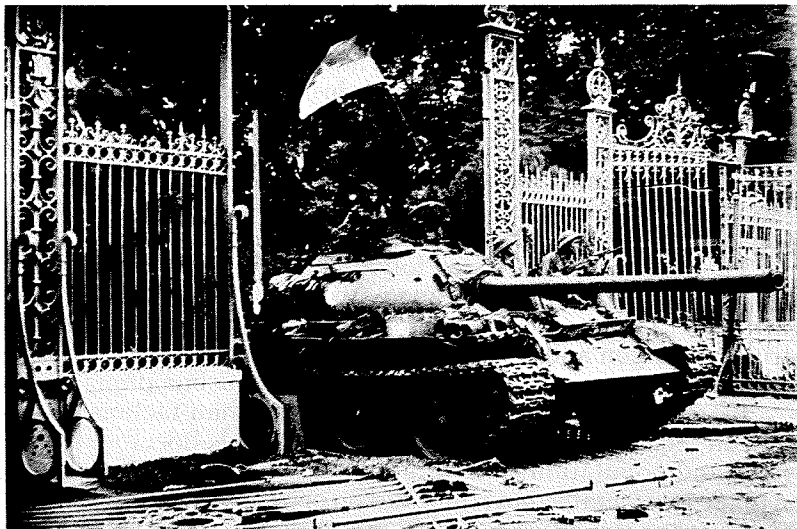
He did not abandon the Viet Cong; as they slowly gave ground, he sent in North Vietnamese "fillers" to sustain their local battalions, and tried to keep the supply lines open. Even so, by U.S. estimates, the Viet Cong guerrilla strength dropped by 50 percent between 1968 and 1972.† In some districts, the surviving Viet Cong simply stopped fighting.

However, by mid-1969, even as the Communists lost ground in the South, from Hanoi's point of view, the "contradictions" in the enemy camp promised new gains. Thanks to U.S. domestic political pressures, Hanoi had already achieved two major concessions, gratis: first, Lyndon Johnson's pre-Election Day total halt to the bombing of the North in 1968 and a "cap" on U.S. troop strength (549,500) in the South; then, Richard Nixon's mid-1969 decision to start withdrawing U.S. troops unilaterally from Indochina. If American antiwar sentiment had been under-

---

\**The New York Review of Books*, Oct. 21, 1982.

† Source: U.S. Army Center of Military History. Few Viet Cong "hard-core" cadres surrendered or rallied to the Saigon side. However, even before Tet 1968, thousands of Viet Cong wearied of life in the bush, on short rations, far from home. In 1967 alone, there were some 27,000 *chieu hoi* (ralliers), mostly rank-and-file guerrillas, porters, and the like.



*A Soviet-built PAVN T-54 tank flying a Viet Cong flag crashes through the presidential palace gates in Saigon on April 30, 1975.*

estimated before Tet, it became an important part of Hanoi's political *dau tranh*\* strategy during 1969–72. At the Paris peace talks initiated by LBJ, Hanoi's Le Duc Tho stalled for time; the North Vietnamese periodically hinted in public of possible "breakthroughs," thus stirring new clamor in Washington, then held firm in secret talks with Henry Kissinger.†

By early 1972, after mauling an ill-fated ARVN thrust against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos a year earlier and surviving the allies' 1970 Cambodia incursion, General Giap was ready to return in force to the South. He would launch not a "people's war" but a conventional assault. He sought to re-establish his regular units back inside the South, upset Richard

\* *Dau tranh* was a strategic concept meaning "struggle," with both military and political emphases. See Douglas Pike, *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong*, MIT, 1969.

† In a February 1969 interview, Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci said to Giap: "General, the Americans also say that you have lost half a million [men]." Giap replied: "The exact number." Fallaci: "Exact?" Giap: "Exact." Assigning responsibility for the failed 1968 Tet Offensive to the NLF, Giap went on to say that the Americans would lose eventually: "The Americans will be defeated in time, by getting tired. And in order to tire them, we have to go on, to last . . . for a long time. That's what we've always done." Fallaci, *Interview with History*, Liveright, 1976, pp. 82–84.

---

Nixon's "Vietnamization," and lend succor to the remaining Viet Cong guerrillas. Giap and the Politburo felt that Nixon's rapprochement with Beijing and détente with Moscow threatened to isolate the North Vietnamese over the long term. Hanoi's leaders, thinking of Tet 1968, believed that a spectacular success during a U.S. election year amid pervasive antiwar sentiment would force Nixon to agree to the replacement of the Thieu regime by a pro-Communist coalition in Saigon.

### A Decent Interval

Giap failed to anticipate the resilience of the South Vietnamese, the vigor of the U.S. response, and the lukewarm backing of Hanoi's allies, China and the Soviet Union. Neither Mao nor Brezhnev cancelled his scheduled summit with Nixon.

Seeking once again to shatter the South Vietnamese, Giap massed his new Soviet-supplied tanks and artillery at three points: the DMZ, the Central Highlands near Kontum, and An Loc north of Saigon. For the first time, he committed 14 regular North Vietnamese divisions, virtually his entire army, to battle in the South. The initial gains were considerable: The green Third ARVN Division broke at Quang Tri, and other ARVN units retreated. But nowhere did Giap deploy enough forces to score a breakthrough. American C-130 transports shifted ARVN's paratroops and marines from crisis to crisis. Although most of the 95,000 U.S. troops still "in-country" eschewed combat, American advisers coordinated firepower, helicopter support, and logistics. And Nixon quickly reinforced U.S. air power and naval gunfire in the South, resumed bombing the North, and mined the supply port of Haiphong. General Creighton Abrams was able to use 129 B-52s to strike hard whenever the North Vietnamese regiments massed to attack. As at Tet 1968, Giap's forces were unable to exploit initial gains; once again the ARVN, despite its heaviest casualties of the war, and the Regional and Popular Forces militia muddled through. This time, the Viet Cong played almost no military role. The Easter Offensive stalled by June, then receded slightly, leaving behind prisoners and scores of wrecked tanks.

At a price of an estimated 100,000 dead, Giap did score some significant gains. His PAVN regulars were back inside the South and, here and there, in good position to threaten ARVN units, or to ease the pressure on surviving local Viet Cong guerrillas. As he began to rebuild his decimated forces, Giap was well positioned for another drive, and his foe, as events would show, was badly overextended.

---

But to his colleagues in Hanoi, the Easter Offensive did not count as a glittering success. The decision was made to embrace a "talk-fight" strategy, resuming the Paris peace negotiations, putting reliance on war-weariness in the United States and on Nixon's quest for a quick ending.

When Hanoi obstructed the talks in November and took advantage of a U.S. bombing halt to rebuild its defenses (and re-supply its troops in the South), Nixon unleashed the Navy and Air Force and for the first time sent B-52s over Hanoi (and Haiphong). During a 12-day campaign (interrupted by a Christmas cease-fire), the U.S. bombers left the North Vietnamese capital largely unscathed but smashed up both air defenses and transport, leaving North Vietnam open to further attack. A peace agreement was signed in Paris on January 27, 1973.

In dealing with Henry Kissinger, Le Duc Tho succeeded in securing an American withdrawal, coupled with a continued North Vietnamese presence in the South and in Laos and Cambodia. Soon, Hanoi realized that Saigon could not count on further American support. PAVN commanders prepared for a final offensive in 1976. Their chief worry, the possible return of American B-52s, eased after Washington failed to react to the PAVN's seizure of Phuoc Long, a border province north of Saigon, in early 1975, in a clear violation of the Paris cease-fire accords. Even more surprising to the Politburo was the failure of ARVN, poorly deployed and badly led, without direct American support, to fight effectively, as they had in 1972.

Hanoi sped up its timetable. General Van Tien Dung's Great Spring Offensive, with Soviet artillery and tanks, began in March with a push through the Central Highlands; the ARVN defense turned into a rout. Saigon was captured on April 30, 1975. Thieu fled into exile, and the war was over. Hanoi quickly abandoned any pretense of autonomy for the Viet Cong. By 1976, the NLF was dissolved, and the South was part of the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Liberation brought tens of thousands of South Vietnamese, including former critics of the Thieu regime, into Communist "re-education camps," and eventually sent hundreds of thousands more escaping by sea—the "boat people." More than 425,000 Vietnamese are now in the United States. Their children speak English and attend local schools. In Washington, D.C., in Los Angeles, in San Francisco, Vietnamese names are cropping up with increasing frequency on lists of National Merit Scholars and high school valedictorians. Meanwhile, back home, General Giap's forces, supplied by the Soviets, are still at war, this time to prop up a friendly regime in Cambodia.

## LESSONS: A SOLDIER'S VIEW

*by Harry G. Summers, Jr.*

A story made the rounds of the Army during the closing days of the Vietnam War. When the Nixon administration took over in 1969, so the story goes, Pentagon officials fed all the data on North Vietnam and the United States into a computer: population, gross national product, manufacturing capacity, size of the armed forces, and the like. The computer was then asked: "When will we win?" It took only a moment to answer: "You won in 1964!"

From the American professional soldier's perspective, the most frustrating aspect of the Vietnam conflict is that the U.S. armed forces did everything they were supposed to do, winning every major battle of the war, yet North Vietnam, rather than the United States, triumphed in the end. How could U.S. troops have succeeded so well, but the war effort have failed so miserably?

Some historians, notably Herbert Y. Schandler, have blamed President Lyndon Baines Johnson's refusal to curtail his Great Society programs to meet the needs of wartime. That is only part of the answer. Even if Johnson had chosen between "guns and butter," Schandler himself observes, no amount of men and firepower could have won the war without a coherent White House war strategy.

Others, such as historian Russell F. Weigley, argue that America's failure was tactical, an attempt to apply conventional military doctrines to a "revolutionary" war. But the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces decimated the Viet Cong guerrillas after Hanoi's 1968 Tet Offensive, and the Communists emerged victorious only in the spring of 1975, after the Americans went home, when Hanoi launched a conventional armored assault upon the South.

Few Army officers who served in Vietnam accept the simplistic explanation that a collapse of national will, or a home-front "stab in the back" fostered by the New Left and the news media, made this country lose the war. Older officers tend to blame civilian leaders, notably Defense Secretary Robert S.



---

McNamara, while younger men criticize senior generals, notably General William C. Westmoreland, the U.S. field commander.

The causes of U.S. failure, in my view, are more complicated. And they start at the top.

First of all, President Johnson made a conscious political decision not to mobilize the American people for war. This was a fundamental mistake. (Among other things, Johnson had forgotten that the attempt to fight a war in Korea in 1950–53 without a congressional declaration of war had helped to cripple the Truman Presidency.) This misjudgment of the nature of limited war was highlighted by McNamara, who was quoted as saying that Vietnam was “developing an ability in the United States to fight a limited war, to go to war without the necessity of arousing the public ire.”

Why was this approach adopted?

### Carrots and Sticks

Civilian limited-war theorists such as Robert Osgood and Thomas Schelling had (falsely) postulated that the existence of nuclear weapons had entirely changed the nature and conduct of warfare and that all past battlefield experiences were thus irrelevant. Political leaders, the academic theorists seemed to contend, should tightly control the conduct of a limited war, “fine-tuning” while ignoring public opinion and the demands of the fighting men if necessary. As defense analyst Stephen Peter Rosen observes, such arguments, widely echoed, helped to persuade the Vietnam-era generation of policy-makers—particularly McNamara, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, and President Johnson himself—to think of limited war as an *instrument* of diplomacy, of bargaining with the enemy, rather than as a bitter struggle in which the nation invested blood and treasure to secure important goals.\*

Largely accepting this approach during the 1964–66 build-up in Vietnam, LBJ and his civilian advisers stressed the dispatch of “signals” to the enemy rather than military meas-

---

\*“Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War,” *International Security* 7, Fall 1982.

*Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., 51, was born in Covington, Ky., and received his B.A. from the University of Maryland. He graduated from the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. After enlisting in 1947, he saw combat in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Now on the faculty of the Army War College, he is the author of On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War (1982).*



*The Vietnam GI averaged 19 years of age compared with 26 in World War II. Two-thirds of the men killed in Indochina were 21 or younger.*

ures to win the war. They avoided seemingly risky strategic decisions that could have ended the war.

"I saw our bombs as my political resources for negotiating a peace," Johnson later explained to political scientist Doris Kearns. "On the one hand, our planes and our bombs could be used as carrots for the South, strengthening the morale of the South Vietnamese and pushing them to clean up their corrupt house, by demonstrating the depth of our commitment to the war. On the other hand, our bombs could be used as sticks against the North, pressuring North Vietnam to stop its aggression against the South."

Washington's overall defensive stance in Indochina surrendered the long-range initiative to the enemy and, inevitably, alienated the American public. In effect, Lyndon Johnson limited not only his objectives in the war, but the military and political means employed to attain them. Fearing Communist Chinese intervention,\* the President variously declared that he

\*But CIA estimates in 1965-67 belittled this possibility: Little love was lost between Hanoi and Beijing, and the Chinese would only enter the war if the U.S. invaded North Vietnam.

---

would restrict the bombing to the southern portions of North Vietnam, that U.S. troops would never invade the North, and that the United States would under no circumstances use nuclear weapons. He forbade U.S. ground commanders to interfere with crucial Communist base areas and reinforcement routes in neighboring Laos and Cambodia; in short, he chose to treat South Vietnam as an "island."

Johnson did not apply political pressure upon the Soviet Union to stop its materiel support of North Vietnam, without which the war would have soon ended. His successor, Richard Nixon, took firm action during Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive, sharply increasing the bombing against the North and mining Haiphong harbor. But he refused to take such decisive steps in 1969 to end the war, partly because he feared such bold action would endanger the budding U.S. rapprochement with China and détente with the Soviet Union. (He secretly bombed Hanoi's bases in Cambodia instead.)

#### **Don't Alarm the Home Folks**

In sum, the civilian policy-makers failed to understand what most ordinary Americans know in their bones: *War*, whether limited or not, imposes a unique national effort. It has its own imperatives, its own dynamic. It requires the undivided attention and dedication of the President, the Congress, and the citizenry. The President, in particular, has the duty to define the aims of the war, to fix a military strategy for success, and to clarify for the American people why they and their sons should be willing to make major sacrifices.

As Dean Rusk stated in 1976, "We never made any effort to create a war psychology in the United States during the Vietnam affair. We didn't have military parades through cities. . . . We tried to do in cold blood perhaps what can only be done in hot blood, when sacrifices of this order are involved."

Unlike North Vietnam, the United States never focused its full attention on the war. President Johnson believed that destiny had chosen him to transform America through his Great Society programs, and that the country could simultaneously afford guns and butter. "I knew from the start," Johnson confided to Kearns in 1970 about the early weeks of 1965, "that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. . . . I was de-

---

terminated to be a leader of war *and* a leader of peace.”

In addition to refusing to cut back his domestic programs as the war began, the President failed to seek a congressional declaration of war against North Vietnam, to call up the reserves, or to ask for a tax increase until 1967.\*

The Johnson administration also sought to disguise the cost and impact of the Vietnam effort by engaging in a slow and incremental build-up of the air war and U.S. combat forces. Demonstrating strength and determination to the enemy—without alarming the home folks—became the primary aim of Washington’s early policy in Vietnam.

By increasing air sorties over the North from 55,000 in 1965 to 148,000 in 1966, for instance, U.S. policy-makers entertained few illusions about turning the tide: In 1966, the bombing cost the United States \$9.60 for every \$1 of damage inflicted upon the enemy, to say nothing of American pilots lost in action. Rather, they thought the growing air effort would convey the strength of the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam.

Similarly, William Bundy, then Assistant Secretary of State, favored sending U.S. troops to the northern provinces of South Vietnam in January 1965 because “it would have a real stiffening effect in Saigon, and a strong signal effect to Hanoi.” But gradualism in the air and on the ground proved poor psycho-strategy. It was also poor politics: Congress and the public never mobilized for war.

### Johnson’s War

The Vietnam War made clear that Congress should declare war whenever large numbers of U.S. troops engage in sustained combat abroad. As General Westmoreland later wrote, “President Johnson . . . should have forced the Congress to face its constitutional responsibility for waging war.” Following Communist attacks against U.S. bases (at Pleiku, in February 1965), Johnson probably could have obtained a congressional declaration of war against North Vietnam, thereby slowing the rise of later opposition from Congress. And if Johnson had failed to win a congressional mandate, he at least would not have felt compelled by fears of right-wing criticism to commit U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam’s defense. In both cases, the country would have shared in the debate and in the decision.

By failing to bring the public and the Congress into the war effort, Johnson drove a wedge between the Army and large seg-

---

\*Truman did not ask for a declaration of war against North Korea in 1950, but he did mobilize reserves, seek price controls, ask for tax increases, and curb domestic programs.

### THE VIETNAM VETERAN

"There is something special about Vietnam veterans," antiwar psychologist Robert Jay Lifton wrote in *Home from the War* (1973). "Everyone who has contact with them seems to agree that they are different from veterans of other wars." U.S. intervention in South Vietnam, Lifton suggested, had produced a deeply troubled Lost Generation. On television and in the movies (*Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*) of the 1970s, the Vietnam GI was regularly portrayed as either victim or psychopath—at war with himself and society. In effect, such stereotypes helped to make the veteran a scapegoat for an unpopular war.

The available facts, drawn from Veterans Administration data and other surveys, supply a different portrait.

Of the 8,744,000 personnel on active duty during the "Vietnam era" (August 5, 1964, to January 27, 1973), 3,403,000 served in the Southeast Asia theater. Roughly 2,594,000 of that number served in South Vietnam; perhaps 40 to 60 percent of them fought in combat, provided close combat support, or were frequently exposed to hostile action.

How well did the U.S. combat soldier and Marine perform during their one-year tours? Most analyses support the conclusion that American officers and men learned fast and fought well against a tenacious, often elusive foe during the 1965–68 period preceding President Nixon's 1969 decision to begin to withdraw. Thereafter, discipline eroded. Recorded "fraggings"—assaults by troops upon officers with intent to kill, to injure, or to intimidate—rose from 96 in 1969 to 222 in 1971. Drug abuse reached epidemic proportions; in 1971, 28.5 percent of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam admitted to using narcotics such as heroin and opium. Worldwide Army desertion rates rose from 14.7 per thousand in Fiscal Year (FY) 1966 to 73.5 per thousand in FY 1971.

But U.S. Army desertion rates during World War II were not dissimilar (63 per thousand in 1944). Indeed, most desertions by those who served in Indochina took place *after* they came home and were seldom related to opposition to the war; drugs and insubordination were a worldwide Army phenomenon. Ninety-seven percent of Vietnam-era veterans earned honorable discharges.

The "psychopath" image was equally far-fetched. Despite the war's peculiar strains, the rate of psychological breakdowns ("combat fatigue") among servicemen in Vietnam was below those of Korea and World War II. Yet American servicemen suffered permanently disabling wounds at a far greater rate in Vietnam than in earlier wars—300 percent higher than in World War II, 70 percent higher than in Korea—partly because of the Viet Cong's use of mines and booby traps. Improved medical care enabled more badly wounded men to survive.

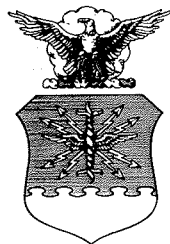
Despite the much-publicized March 1968 massacre of civilians at the hamlet of My Lai by an Army platoon led by Second Lieutenant William L. Calley, few U.S. infantrymen committed atrocities during the Vietnam War; prosecution of offenders tended to be vigorous and punishment harsh.

U.S. troops in Vietnam represented a much broader cross-section of America than is commonly supposed. For example, blacks accounted for no more than 12.5 percent of U.S. troops in Vietnam, and for 12.3 percent of the total number of Americans killed in the war at a time when blacks constituted 13.5 percent of the total U.S. male population of military age. Only 25 percent of U.S. personnel deployed in Vietnam consisted of *draftees*, versus 66 percent of military personnel during World War II.

The chief inequities were economic. Three-fourths of the troops in Vietnam came from lower-middle- or working-class families (and one-fourth came from families below the poverty level). Compared with their more affluent peers, individuals with lower-income backgrounds faced twice as great a likelihood of serving in the military. (Ivy League college graduates were conspicuously rare in Vietnam.)

Most Vietnam veterans have adapted successfully to civilian life; and 14 are now in Congress (two Senators, 12 Representatives). "Post-traumatic stress disorder," which has afflicted perhaps one-fourth of Vietnam veterans, appears to derive from the common perception among these men that they received a far less friendly reception upon their return than did veterans of other American wars. This perception is not inaccurate. For one thing, neither Lyndon Johnson nor Richard Nixon (nor the nation's college presidents) proposed a "GI Bill" for Vietnam veterans that matched the federal education benefits awarded to earlier generations of ex-servicemen.

Even so, statistics on suicide, divorce, crime, and drug use show that the Vietnam veteran compares favorably on these counts with his nonveteran peer. And in March 1982, despite the economic recession, more than 90 percent of Vietnam veterans held jobs.



---

ments of the populace, notably intellectuals and college students. Even in the eyes of many moderate critics, the armed forces and the GIs in combat soon became the executors of "Johnson's war," rather than the instruments of the national will. For future Presidents, the War Powers Act of 1973, which bars presidential commitment of U.S. troops in combat beyond 90 days without congressional approval, partially solves this problem. But only partially. It does not necessarily force the President to mobilize the entire nation.

### Back to Basics

Thus, as the Constitution envisions, the civilian leadership—the President and the Congress—must make the basic decisions about going to war and define the war's objectives. For their part, the nation's senior military leaders have the obligation to devise the strategy necessary for success—as they did in World War II and Korea. During the Indochina conflict, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) did not play this role. Unlike all his wartime predecessors, the President allowed civilian strategists with little or no combat experience to take charge, as if their "cost-benefit" or "psychological" approaches were superior to the insights of the military commanders. One result: From June 1965 to June 1966, as U.S. troop strength in Vietnam grew from 60,000 to 268,000, the President met privately with his Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson, only twice.

Seeking always to "keep their options open," the civilian leaders never determined the maximum number of troops that the United States *should* commit to Vietnam, let alone a plan to win the war. For example, despite strong reservations expressed by Under Secretary of State George W. Ball and National Security Adviser Bundy, McNamara persuaded Johnson in July 1965 to approve a build-up of U.S. troops in South Vietnam to more than 200,000 men without any assurance that that number would suffice to shore up the beleaguered Saigon regime, let alone to defeat the Communist forces decisively on the battlefield. At the Pentagon, during the Tet 1968 crisis, Defense Secretary Clark M. Clifford discovered that he "couldn't get hold of a plan to win the war. [When] I attempted to find out how long it would take to achieve our goal, there was no answer. When I asked how many more men it would take . . . no one could be certain."

Westmoreland, despairing of winning White House approval of the higher troop levels that he believed necessary to win the war, had received much the same impression in Wash-

ington in late 1967 when he proposed—and proclaimed—a strategy for Vietnamization. “The [Johnson] administration was totally noncommittal on it,” he later wrote. “They kind of nodded their heads and did not disagree.”

The Joint Chiefs, led by General Earle Wheeler, strongly questioned the White House’s approach in private, but Johnson (and Nixon) rarely consulted them directly. The Chiefs acquiesced in presidential mismanagement of the war, even allowing Johnson to set weekly bombing targets in North Vietnam; they hoped for better days. But the military leaders could have best served their country in early 1965 by dramatically protesting against the President’s policies. By quietly threatening to resign, for instance, the Chiefs might have forced the Commander-in-Chief to adopt a winning strategy in Indochina—notably, by cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail and isolating the southern battlefield. Or, failing that, the JCS could have brought the dispute before the American people and spurred a national debate on the war *before* a major commitment put a half-million U.S. troops into battle *without* a strategy.\*

In any event, the military leaders should not have echoed Washington’s euphemisms—“kill ratio,” “neutralize,” “incur-sion”—to disguise the bloody realities of combat. General Fred Weyand argued in 1976 that as

military professionals we must speak out, we must counsel our political leaders and alert the American public that there is no such thing as a “splendid little war.” There is no such thing as a war fought on the cheap. War is death and destruction. The American way of war is particularly violent, deadly and dreadful. We believe in using “things”—artillery, bombs, massive firepower—in order to conserve our soldiers’ lives. The enemy, on the other hand, made up for his lack of “things” by expending men instead of machines, and he suffered enormous casualties. . . . The Army must make the price of involvement clear *before* we get involved, so that America can weigh the probable costs of involvement against the dangers of uninvolved . . . for there are worse things than war.

In the field, the military’s role is to destroy the enemy’s forces and its will to fight, even in an allegedly “revolutionary” conflict, as the North Vietnamese proved conclusively in their

\*LBJ worried about keeping the generals in line. Indeed, he once told Westmoreland, “General, I have a lot riding on you. . . . I hope you don’t pull a MacArthur on me.” Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, Doubleday, 1976, p. 159.





*In this 1969 cartoon for the New York Review of Books, David Levine savaged Richard Nixon—and his predecessors—for explaining U.S. policy in South Vietnam in terms of prior commitments.*

spring 1975 blitzkrieg. In my view, the U.S. Army should never have become so heavily engaged in “nation-building,” pacification, and, thus, local politics as it did in South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese Army and the Saigon government, perhaps with the aid of the U.S. embassy, could have conducted the struggle for the “hearts and minds” of the South Vietnamese people. In any case, this struggle, so heavily publicized by Washington, was *secondary*. As events made abundantly clear, the troops of the North Vietnamese Army, not the southerners of the Viet Cong, posed the primary threat to South Vietnam’s independence, and eliminating that danger should have been the chief concern of both the U.S. Army and the White House from the start.

Even as it alienated or confused Americans at home, the gradualist and almost timid manner in which the United States had waged the war surely eroded its diplomats’ credibility when talks began in Paris in 1968. The Americans and their allies could not conduct successful negotiations—successful in the sense of securing a withdrawal of Hanoi’s troops from the South with residual U.S. air power serving as a deterrent against fu-

---

ture invasion from the North—from a position of weakness. No one could. President Johnson's nine unilateral U.S. cease-fires and 10 bombing halts during 1965–68 had only earned the enemy's contempt, as Hanoi's repeated cease-fire violations and accelerated transport of supplies over the Ho Chi Minh Trail during these episodes demonstrated.

And by announcing in June 1969 that the United States would begin withdrawing its troops without any quid pro quo from the enemy, President Nixon similarly signaled a lack of resolve to Hanoi that probably encouraged the enemy to stall the negotiating process, in the expectation of an eventual total American pullout. Predictably, "Vietnamization" proved an empty threat since no President could guarantee perpetual U.S. aid to the vulnerable South Vietnamese, let alone the re-entry of American naval and air power into the region in the event of renewed North Vietnamese aggression from Laos and Cambodia.

In war, negotiations with the adversary cannot be a *substitute* for a coherent military strategy. To Americans, weary of bloodshed, negotiations with North Vietnam seemed to promise an end to the war. But Hanoi's unwillingness in 1968–72 to reach a compromise with Saigon, rather than the presence of U.S. ground troops or Saigon's intransigence, posed the key obstacle to a peaceful settlement in South Vietnam. Always hoping that a "reasonable" (i.e., painless) settlement was possible, the Johnson and Nixon administrations sought "honorable" conditions for American extrication, which, in the end, amounted only to the release of Americans held prisoner by Hanoi and a "decent interval" for the South Vietnamese ally we left behind.

War may be too serious a matter to leave solely to military professionals, but it is also too serious a matter to leave only to civilian amateurs. Never again must the President commit American men to combat without first fully defining the nation's aims and then rallying Congress and the nation for war. Otherwise, the courageous Americans who fought and died in the defense of South Vietnam will truly have done so in vain.

---

---

## BACKGROUND BOOKS

---

### VIETNAM

As the *New York Times's* Fox Butterfield wrote after the Wilson Center's Vietnam history conference last January, "a small group of scholars, journalists, and military specialists . . . have started to look afresh at the war."

In so doing, examining new documentation, they have challenged many of the old claims of the "hawks" and, more notably, of the antiwar "doves" whose views largely prevailed in academe and book publishing and often gained media acceptance during and after the turmoil of the Vietnam years.

Perhaps the first apolitical "revisionist" study was *Tet!* (1971) by *Washington Post* veteran Don Oberdorfer, who concluded, as most historians do now, that the Communists' spectacular 1968 Tet Offensive was a defeat for Hanoi in South Vietnam, even as it demoralized political Washington. In *The Unmaking of a President* (1977), Herbert Schandler, a retired Army colonel and one of the authors of the *Pentagon Papers*, followed up with a scholarly, eye-opening dissection of Washington decision-making during the hectic February-March 1968 period. Another *Postman*, Peter Braestrup, analyzed press and TV performance during the Tet drama; he found that journalists had been overwhelmed by this *Big Story* (1977) and too hastily portrayed what turned out to be a Communist setback as a battlefield disaster for the allies.

A major contribution to understanding how the United States got into Vietnam came from Richard Betts (see p. 94) and Leslie Gelb, director of the *Pentagon Papers* project

and now a *New York Timesman* in Washington. In *The Irony of Vietnam* (1979), Betts and Gelb undercut one widespread notion that the press itself had fostered: that Lyndon Johnson secretly decided on massive escalation in Vietnam even as he seemed to promise the contrary during his 1964 presidential campaign. Working with newly released documents at the LBJ Library in Austin, political scientist Larry Berman followed up with a closer examination of LBJ's decisions and hesitations during the 1965 escalation in *Planning a Tragedy* (1982); he is now working on a sequel covering the 1966-68 period.

American hopes for a negotiated settlement only led to confusion, wrote political scientist Allan Goodman in *The Lost Peace* (1978), a history of U.S. peace "feelers" and peace talks with Hanoi. The North Vietnamese had told Washington from the outset, Goodman added, that there was really "nothing to negotiate"; victory, not the prewar status quo, was the North Vietnamese objective.

Relying partly on newly obtainable military files, Guenter Lewy, a political scientist at the University of Massachusetts, produced a controversial, data-packed study of *America in Vietnam* (1978). Even as he criticized U.S. tactics and described South Vietnam's long ordeal (including 300,000 civilian deaths), Lewy concluded that Americans did not wage an "immoral" or unusually destructive war in the South, or engage in "terror bombing" of the North, as alleged by the Left.

Memoirs aside, few U.S. military

men have dwelt, at book-length, on the lessons of the war. However, Colonel Harry Summers (see p. 125) broke the ice in 1981 with *On Strategy*, an attempt to prod his fellow officers (and civilian policy-makers) into re-reading the maxims of Clausewitz as they applied to the U.S. failure in Vietnam.

And a former critic of the war, *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz, stirred up a storm in literary Manhattan by exhuming the wartime statements of the New Left and analyzing *Why We Were in Vietnam* (1982). It was not "immoral" to help the South Vietnamese defend themselves against Hanoi, he argued, but it was probably impossible, given the circumstances, to win.

None of these books is the last word. Much territory remains to be explored. Many complex issues need added investigation.

The further study of the conduct of the war (especially after 1968) has been limited by the slow—and slowing—rate of declassification of official U.S. documents, and the reticence of some major figures. Lyndon Johnson, Henry Kissinger, and Richard Nixon have done their memoirs. But none has been forthcoming from Dean Rusk or Robert S. McNamara (who, unlike Rusk, declines even to discuss Vietnam). Moreover,

no great enthusiasm has been shown by private foundations or universities for Vietnam studies using the sizable archival resources that now *are* open to scholars.

Even so, research is being done. Journalist Arnold Isaacs is writing *Without Honor*, a study of the fall of South Vietnam. Political scientist Timothy J. Lomperis will soon publish a critique of the oft-cited "revolutionary" aspects of Hanoi's war in the South, *Vietnam: The War Everyone Lost—and Won*. Editor Robert Manning is shepherding an illustrated multivolume history, *The Vietnam Experience*, for Boston Publishing Company. Newsman Neil Sheehan is finishing a biography of John Paul Vann, the archetypal U.S. adviser in Vietnam. Journalist Stanley Karnow is completing a fresh survey, *Vietnam, A History*.

Keeping track of such efforts—as well as of contemporary affairs—is Douglas Pike (see p. 114). His quarterly *Indochina Chronology* newsletter is available free by writing to Professor Pike, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720.

The armed services have employed by far the largest number of historians devoted to chronicling the Vietnam War, especially U.S. combat experience. The Army published a



series of monographs of uneven quality (on the Special Forces, riverine tactics, etc.) during the 1970s; its 16-volume official history of the war will only start appearing later in this decade, in the tradition of its massive, highly regarded accounts of World War II and Korea.

The Marine Corps has published three volumes of its war history (through 1966); the Air Force and Navy have moved more slowly. A "Select Bibliography of Department

of Defense Publications of the Southeast Asia Conflict" is available by writing LTC A. G. Traas, Histories Division, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C. 20314.

A lengthy essay on Vietnam books was published in *The Wilson Quarterly* ("Vietnam as History," Spring 1978), too early to include James Webb's *Fields of Fire* and several other first-rate combat novels. However, most of the books listed below were cited in that essay.

#### A SHORT VIETNAM BOOKLIST

*History, Memoirs, Journalism, Polemics, and Fiction*

Air War Study Group, Cornell Univ., **The Air War in Indochina** (Beacon, rev. ed., 1972); Michael Arlen, **Living Room War** (Viking, 1969).

Larry Berman, **Planning a Tragedy** (Norton, 1982); Douglas Blaufarb, **The Counter-Insurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance** (Free Press, 1977); Anthony T. Bouscaren, ed., **All Quiet on the Eastern Front: The Death of South Vietnam** (Devin-Adair, 1976); Richard Boyle, **The Flower of the Dragon: The Breakdown of the U.S. Army in Vietnam** (Ramparts, 1972); Peter Braestrup, **Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington** (Yale, rev. ed., 1983); Jack Broughton, **Thud Ridge** (Lippincott, 1969); C. D. Bryan, **Friendly Fire** (Putnam's, 1976); Josiah Bunting, **The Lionheads** (Braziller, 1972); Joseph L. Buttinger, **Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled** (Praeger, 1967), **Vietnam: The Unforgettable Tragedy** (Horizon, 1976).

Philip Caputo, **A Rumor of War** (Holt, 1977); Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, **Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam** (Hill & Wang, 1978); Charles Coe, **Young Man in Vietnam** (Four Winds Press, 1968); John L. Cook, **The Advisor** (Dorrance, 1973); Chester L. Cooper, **The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam** (Dodd, 1970).

William J. Duiker, **The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam** (Westview, 1981); Dennis J. Duncanson, **Government and Revolution in**

**Vietnam** (Oxford, 1968); Van Tien Dung, **Our Great Spring Victory** (Monthly Review, 1977).

Frank Callihan Elkins, **The Heart of a Man** (Norton, 1973); Gloria Emerson, **Winners and Losers** (Random, 1976).

Bernard Fall, **Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu** (Lippincott, 1966), **Street Without Joy: Insurgency in Indochina, 1946-63** (Stackpole, rev. ed., 1963), **The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis** (Praeger, rev. ed., 1964); Frances FitzGerald, **Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam** (Little, Brown, 1972); Charles B. Flood, **The War of the Innocents** (McGraw-Hill, 1970).

Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, **The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked** (Brookings, 1979); Allan E. Goodman, **The Lost Peace: America's Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War** (Hoover, 1978), **Politics in War: The Bases of Political Community in South Vietnam** (Harvard, 1973); Zalin Grant, **Survivors** (Norton, 1975); Sen. Mike Gravel, ed., **The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam** (Beacon, 1971).

David Halberstam, **The Best and the Brightest** (Random, 1972), **The Making of a Quagmire** (Random, 1965), **One Very Hot Day** (Houghton, 1967); P. Edward Haley, **Congress and the Fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia** (Assoc. Univ.

- Presses, 1982); Larry Heinemann, *Close Quarters* (Farrar, 1977); James B. Hendry, *The Small World of Khanh Hau* (Aldine, 1964); Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (Knopf, 1977); George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (Wiley, 1979); Seymour Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath* (Random, 1970); Gerald Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (Yale, 1964); *Sons of the Mountains* (Yale, 1982); *Free in the Forest* (Yale, 1982); John G. Hubbell et al., *P.O.W.: A Definitive History of the American Prisoner of War Experience in Vietnam, 1964-1973* (Reader's Digest Press, 1976); Ken Hurwitz, *Marching Nowhere* (Norton, 1971).
- Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-69* (Holt, 1971); Ward S. Just, *To What End: Report from Vietnam* (Houghton, 1968).
- Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (Harper, 1976); Steven Kelman, *Push Comes to Shove: The Escalation of Student Protest* (Houghton, 1970); Douglas Kinard, *The War Managers* (Univ. Press of New Eng., 1977); Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Little, Brown, 1979); *Years of Upheaval* (Little, Brown, 1982); Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Rand, 1972); David Kraslow and Stuart Loory, *The Secret Search for Peace in Vietnam* (Random, 1968); Nguyen Cao Ky, *Twenty Years and Twenty Days* (Stein & Day, 1976).
- Anthony Lake, ed., *The Vietnam Legacy: The War, American Society and the Future of American Foreign Policy* (N.Y. Univ., 1976); Daniel Lang, *Casualties of War* (McGraw-Hill, 1969); Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford, 1978); Don Luce and John Sommer, *Vietnam: The Unheard Voices* (Cornell, 1969).
- S.L.A. Marshall, *Ambush* (Cowles, 1969), *Bird* (Cowles, 1968), *The Fields of Bamboo* (Dial, 1971), *West to Cambodia* (Cowles, 1968); John T. McAlister, *Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution* (Knopf, 1969); John T. McAlister and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution* (Harper, 1970); Harvey Meyerson, *Vinh Long* (Houghton, 1970); John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (Wiley, 1973).
- Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (Grosset, 1978).
- Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (Doubleday, 1971); Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (Delacorte, 1978); *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (Delacorte, 1973); Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War Revisited* (Westview, 1979).
- D. R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (Presidio, 1978); Howard R. Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam* (American Enterprise Institute, 1973); Douglas Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1976* (Hoover, 1978), *The Vietcong Strategy of Terror* (U.S. Mission, Saigon, 1970), *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong* (MIT, 1969), *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (MIT, 1966); Robert Pisor, *The End of the Line: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Norton, 1982); Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (Simon & Schuster, 1982); Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Univ. of Calif., 1979); Thomas Powers, *The War at Home: Vietnam and the American People, 1964-1968* (Grossman, 1973).
- Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Univ. of Calif., 1971); Walt Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History* (Macmillan, 1972).
- Harrison E. Salisbury, *Behind the Lines: Hanoi, December 23-January 7* (Harper, 1967); Al Santoli, *Everything We Had* (Random, 1981); Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, 1977); Jonathan Schell, *The Military Half: An Account of Destruction in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin* (Knopf, 1968); Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946-1966* (Harper, rev. ed., 1966), *The Road From War: Vietnam, 1965-1970* (Harper, 1970); U.S.G. Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam* (Government Printing Office, 1969); Susan Sheehan, *Ten Vietnamese* (Knopf, 1967); Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (Random, 1977); Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Presidio, 1982).
- W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, eds., *The Lessons of Vietnam* (Crane, Russak, 1977); Robert F. Turner, *Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Development* (Hoover, 1975).
- Sidney Verba et al., *Vietnam and the Silent Majority: The Dove's Guide* (Harper, 1970); Sandy Vogelgesang, *The Long Dark Night of the Soul: The American Intellectual Left and the Vietnam War* (Harper, 1974).
- James Webb, *Fields of Fire* (Prentice-Hall, 1978); F. J. West, *The Village* (Harper, 1972); William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Doubleday, 1976).