A CONFERENCE REPORT

SOME LESSONS AND NON-LESSONS OF VIETNAM

TEN YEARS AFTER THE PARIS PEACE ACCORDS

WOODROW WILSON INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOLARS

1983
INTRODUCTION by Samuel F. Wells, Jr., and Peter Braestrup

MAP OF SOUTH VIETNAM (Provinces)

MAP OF INDOCHINA

PARTICIPANTS

SELECTED EXCERPTS

SUMMARIES OF THE PAPERS AND DISCUSSIONS:

Panel I

"The U.S. Conduct of the Vietnam War, 1964-73."


Discussion


Discussion


Panel II

"The South Vietnamese and the North Vietnamese."

Douglas Pike. "A Look Back at the Vietnam War: The View From Hanoi."

Discussion

Allan E. Goodman. "Dynamics of the U.S.-South Vietnamese Alliance: What Went Wrong."

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"Lessons and Non-Lessons of the U.S. Experience in Vietnam."

Harry G. Summers, Jr. "Vietnam: Lessons Learned, Unlearned, and Relearned."

Discussion

APPENDICES

"Trends in Popular Support for the Vietnam War" (Tables and Figures from John E. Mueller, War, Presidents and Public Opinion)

A Brief CHRONOLOGY of the Vietnam War (1954-1975)

A Brief Vietnam War BIBLIOGRAPHY
INTRODUCTION

On January 7-8, 1983, some 50 leading historians and analysts of the United States experience in the Vietnam War, 1964-1973, gathered to discuss a set of ten specially commissioned papers at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars at the Smithsonian Institution. The meeting was held under the auspices of the Center's International Security Studies Program and the Wilson Quarterly.

This conference marked the 10th anniversary of the Paris Peace Agreements (January 27, 1973) and the 15th anniversary of the onset of the Vietnamese Communists' offensive of Tet 1968 (January 30-31). The meeting's chief goal was to discuss what scholars now know (and do not know) about the higher conduct of the war in 1964-1973 by the United States, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam.

A second purpose was to discuss what lessons, if any, this experience, as now perceived, should signal to U.S. civilian and military leaders in 1983.

The conference's focus on the "higher conduct" of the war necessarily barred detailed consideration of other key aspects of the long Vietnam conflict, notably the evolution of the formal U.S. commitment to preserve a non-Communist South Vietnam that began in 1955; the role of Communist China and the Soviet Union; developments in neighboring Laos and Cambodia; the changes in Congressional sentiment as U.S. involvement deepened; the battlefield tactics and the twists and turns of U.S. policy; Hanoi's strategy at key moments, such as Tet 1968 and the final months of U.S. combat involvement in 1972-73; the evolution of the U.S. anti-war movement; and the events in Indochina in 1973-75 after U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.

As the conference discussions made clear, not all Vietnam scholars and analysts agree on all issues of "fact" or interpretation.

But there was a surprising degree of agreement on the answers to such questions as: Did Hanoi really wage and win a "people's war" in South Vietnam? Was the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam "immoral"? Was Lyndon Johnson eager to put U.S. troops into Vietnam in 1964-65? Was he optimistic about success? Were his professed fears of Chinese or Soviet intervention supported by intelligence estimates of the time? Did he really consider all the alternatives to U.S. troop commitment presented to him? Did he entertain a strategy for "winning"? Did the U.S. military really confront LBJ with its case for a stronger national effort? Did U.S. hopes for a negotiated compromise settlement ever rest on solid grounds? Was the Vietnam war more unpopular in America than was the Korean war? Did the U.S. peace movement shorten the Vietnam war? Were the U.S. forces and their South Vietnamese allies unable to cope with Hanoi's
troops on the battlefield? Could the North Vietnamese have sustained the war effort in the South without sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia? Did the Nixon-Kissinger strategy of troop withdrawals and peace negotiations with Hanoi hold any real promise of lasting success?

To each of these questions most of the conferees tended to answer "No," albeit with varying degrees of emphasis. These responses contradict many claims by hawks and doves during the war years, assertions that are still echoed in media retrospectives and in analogies (El Salvador, Afghanistan) drawn by public figures and journalists since the war.

Most of the participants seemed to agree that U.S. military intervention in Vietnam was a mistake. They also tended to agree that in a military sense the war in South Vietnam could have been, and in many ways by 1972 was, "won" against Hanoi's forces. Yet several participants also insisted that, given Hanoi's goals and tenacity, stable non-Communist control of South Vietnam would have required the continued presence of a sizable residual U.S. force for perhaps as long as thirty years. Suggesting that such a lengthy military commitment would have proved unacceptable to the Congress and the American people, these scholars and policy analysts debated at some length the question of whether President Lyndon B. Johnson, aware as he was of the dim prospects for clearcut success, could have avoided major U.S. military intervention in 1965. While the participants were divided in their answers to this question, they agreed that whatever type of assistance the U.S. had undertaken, the President should have first determined and then fully explained the goals, prospects for success, and anticipated costs to Congress and the American people. And before any future U.S. intervention overseas, many participants agreed, the President should follow a similar procedure. These conclusions were among many that emerged from two days' intense exchange.

As several conferees noted, few academic scholars are now working on the history of the war. It is not a fashionable research topic in universities today although the war is widely taught on campus as history. The only specialized academic center for serious research on the war (and on other Indochinese matters) is the Indochina Studies Program, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California at Berkeley (see bibliography). Journalists and the armed services' historians are doing most of the retrospective work, even as the LBJ Library in Austin has begun to release important documents on the Johnson Administration's conduct of the war. The Nixon-Ford documents are still largely held secret. Declassification of other wartime documents has slowed, frustrating even the military's own historians. And many questions of "fact" and interpretation remain.
This report is a brief summary of the highlights of the con-
ference proceedings and should not be treated as a verbatim tran-
script. It is intended to be useful to teachers, Indochina special-
ists, journalists and others as an indication of some current
thinking by serious scholars on the war and its lessons.

No such conference can adequately serve as testimony to the
bravery of the Americans and their allies who fought in Vietnam
and the tenacity of their adversaries, reflect the ordeal of the
people of Indo-China, or convey the disarray and division that
came to afflict America during the war years. Even so, there is
value in looking back at the war's conduct in a dispassionate way
and seeing what those who have been writing about it have come to
think ten years after the United States left South Vietnam.

Samuel F. Wells, Jr.
Peter Braestrup

This report was prepared by Robert Pollard, senior research
associate for the International Security Studies Program, with the
help of Elizabeth Dixon, Wilson Center publications officer; Anne
Marie Sherry, the conference coordinator; and Sheilah McLean, Pat
Sheridan, Matthew Torres, and Irene Owsley.

The conference papers and proceedings summarized herein may
not be directly quoted without permission, except where quotation
marks are used in the text. The conference was supported in part,
by the Xerox Foundation and by the Institute for Educational Affairs.

Appendices include a brief bibliography and a chronology.

The proceedings may be published in full later in 1983.
PARTICIPANTS

THE U.S. EXPERIENCE IN VIETNAM


Moderator:

Panelists:


LARRY BERMAN, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California (Davis), has taught at both American and Princeton Universities. He has written extensively on the Presidency, contributing "Johnson and the White House Staff" to Exploring the Johnson Years (1981); his most recent book is Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam (1982).

HERBERT SCHANDLER, Colonel, USA (Ret.), Vice President, American League for Exports and Security Assistance, is the author of The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam (1977), as well as of numerous reports on national security.

Dinner "U.S. Public Opinion and the War."

Moderator:


Speakers:

JOHN E. MUELLER, Professor of Political Science at the University of Rochester, has written extensively on public opinion vis a vis Viet Nam and other wars, and is contributing "Viet Nam Revised" to Armed Forces and Society (forthcoming). His books include War, Presidents, and Public Opinion (1973) and Deterrence, Numbers, and History (1968).

LAWRENCE W. LICHTY, Professor of Communication Arts at the University of Maryland (College Park), is the co-author of American Broadcasting (1975). A former Wilson Center Fellow, he also wrote "Rough Justice on the Saigon Street" (1977).

Panel II "The South Vietnamese and The North Vietnamese."

Moderator:

PETER BRAESTRUP

Panelists:

DOUGLAS PIKE, Director of the Indochina Studies Program of the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of California (Berkeley), is a retired U.S. Foreign Service Officer whose government posts included Saigon, Hong Kong, Taipe and Tokyo. Author of War, Peace and the Viet Cong (1969) and History of the Vietnamese Communist Party (1978), he is now completing two full-length studies entitled Soviet-Vietnamese Relations 1917-1982: A Geo-Political Study and People's Army of Vietnam: The Army that Beat America.

ALLAN E. GOODMAN, Associate Dean and Director of the Master of Science in Foreign Service Program at Georgetown University, served as Presidential Briefing Coordinator for the Director of Central Intelligence and as Special Assistant to the Director of the National

Commentator:


Panel III "Lessons and Non-Lessons of the U.S. Experience in Vietnam."

Moderator:

SAMUEL F. WELLS, JR.

Panelists:


Commentators:

ERNEST MAY, Charles Warren Professor of History at Harvard and a current Wilson Center Fellow, is the author of The Ultimate Decision: The President as Commander in Chief (1960), Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power (1961), American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay (1968), and Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy (1973).

GUESTS

Military Historians:


VINCENT H. DEMMA, Historian, Southeast Asia Branch, U.S. Army Center of Military History, is currently preparing The U.S. Army and the Conflict in Southeast Asia 1961-April 1965 for the U.S. Army's official history of the Vietnam War.


STANLEY L. FALK, Deputy Chief Historian for Southeast Asia, Southeast Asia Branch, U.S. Army Center of Military History, is also director of the official historical series The U.S. Army in Vietnam and author of Bataan: The March of Death (1962), Decision at Leyte (1966), and Liberation of the Philippines (1971).

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RICHARD Kohn, Chief, Office of Air Force History, is a former professor of history at Rutgers University and the author of Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America 1783-1802 (1975). He is also a contributor to Military Review, U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, and American Historical Review.

Colonel DAVID MACISAAC (USAF, Ret.), a former Wilson Center Fellow, is now Research Fellow at the Air University's Air Power Research Institute. He has published reviews and review essays on Vietnam in Air University Review and Air Force Magazine.

Colonel PAUL L. MILES, Associate Professor of History at the United States Military Academy (West Point), is the author of the forthcoming American Grand Strategy in the Second World War: The Role of Admiral William D. Leahy.


RONALD SPECTOR, Acting Chief, Southeast Asia Branch, U.S. Army Center of Military History, has contributed to Pacific Historical Review and Military Affairs and is the author of the forthcoming United States Army in Vietnam: The Early Years.

DAVID F. TRASK, Director, U.S. Army Center of Military History, is the author of Victory Without Peace: American Foreign Relations During the Twentieth Century (1968), and co-author of The Ordeal of World Power: American Diplomacy Since 1900 (1975).

WILLARD J. WEBB, Chief of the Special Projects Branch, Joint Chiefs of Staff Historical Division, has published two volumes of JCS history on the Vietnam War (covering from 1969-1973).
Academic Historians:

JAMES AUSTIN, an Instructor in the Government Department at the University of Texas (Austin), is the author of "The Psychological Factors in Intelligence Activities" (1982) and is presently completing Blind Men and Elephants: Strategic Assessment of Vietnam.

I.M. DESTLER, Senior Associate and Director, Carnegie Endowment's Project on Executive-Congressional Relations in Foreign Policy, is the author of Coping with U.S.-Japanese Economic Conflicts (1982) and Making Foreign Economic Policy (1980).


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TIMOTHY J. LOMPERIS, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Louisiana State University, served as an Intelligence Liaison Officer in Saigon, received the 1981-82 Helen Dwight Reed Award for the Best Dissertation in International Relations (on Vietnam) and is the author of the forthcoming Vietnam: The War Everyone Lost--and Won.


SAMUEL POPKIN, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of California (San Diego), is the author of The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam (1979), and a contributor to Vietnam: Some Basic Issues and Alternatives (1969) and Conflict In World Politics (1971).

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ROBERT J. DONOVAN, formerly with the New York Herald Tribune (Washington bureau chief) and the Los Angeles Times, is the author of The Future of the Republican Party and Eisenhower: The Inside Story (1956) and two volumes covering the Presidency of Harry Truman: Conflict and Crisis (1977) and Tumultuous Years (1982). He is also a former Wilson Center Fellow.

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VU THUY HOANG, currently a Washington Post Researcher, is a veteran of the Washington Post Saigon bureau. The former Managing Editor of the government-run daily Dan-Chu and former Foreign Editor of the influential Chinh Luan, he is the author of over a dozen articles on Vietnamese refugees for the Post and of Rong Vang Vuot Bien, an account of the Vietnamese Boat People.

ARNOLD R. ISAACS, author of the forthcoming Without Honor, a study of the fall of South Vietnam, has served as Bureau Chief of the Baltimore Sun in Saigon and Hong Kong.

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ROBERT MANNING, Editor-in-Chief, Boston Publishing Company, and former Fellow at the Kennedy Institute of Politics, is the editor of BPC's multi-volume series The Vietnam Experience and of Who We Are: An ATLANTIC Monthly Chronicle of the United States and Vietnam (1965).

DON OBERDORFER, diplomatic correspondent for the Washington Post, is the author of Tet! (1971), which was a finalist for the 1971 National Book Award. He is presently with the Council of the Humanities, Princeton University.

NEAL PETERESEN, Acting Deputy Historian, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, has performed internal research on U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia and prepared documentary compilations on Indochinese and Southeast Asian regional security for Foreign Relations of the United States (1950-52 and 1954 volumes); he is the co-editor of Foreign Relations of the United States: The Geneva Conference (1981).


JOSEPH A. BOSCO, former Legal Counsel to the Governor of Massachusetts and Special Assistant to the Secretary of Transportation, is currently practicing law. He is a contributor to the St John's Review.
JOHN E. MURRAY, Major General, USA (Ret.), is the author of The Military Mind and the New Mindlessness (1976), and War, Transport, and Show Biz (1981).

VICTORIA SCHUCK, former chairman of Holyoke College's political science department and past President of Mount Vernon College, is presently researching and writing on the Vietnamese constitution of 1967-75.

BARRY ZORTHIAN, Senior Vice President, Gray and Company, is the former U.S. government chief of press relations and psychological operations in Vietnam.

HARRY ZUBKOFF is the Chief of Research and Analysis Division, Office of the Secretary of the Air Force.
"Kennedy was less willing to consider disengagement than later apologists suggested, and Johnson was less anxious to escalate than later detractors believed . . . .

"[Civilian] leaders [in the 1960s] knew, at critical junctures, that expanding commitment entailed high risks and no assurance of success. Yet at each juncture they saw no acceptable alternative to pressing on." --- Richard Betts

"The United States did not stumble into Vietnam. Each step was a deliberate choice by a careful President who weighed the alternatives as he saw them, limited each response, and took into account the opinion of the public . . . .

"The Joint Chiefs felt that a more ambitious objective was necessary, that of defeating the enemy both in North and South Vietnam . . . . [But] fundamental differences at the national level concerning American objectives in South Vietnam were never resolved nor were these differences surfaced publicly. There was no agreed coherent strategy to achieve American objectives, and, indeed, no agreement as to those objectives . . . . Surprisingly enough, however, it does not appear that any of the military leaders threatened or even contemplated resigning to dramatize their opposition to the limitations on the conduct of the war." --- Herbert Schandler

"Why did it happen? Because Lyndon Johnson dreamed of a Great Society and not of Asian real estate . . . . In the end, the [White House] advisory process mattered only incidentally. Lyndon Johnson mattered a great deal." --- Larry Berman

"[The] military chiefs were sheltered from exposure to hard ethical choices by the umbrella of civilian control. It was one of the distortions of the Vietnam War that civilian control of the military became civilian direction and management, and that military leadership at all levels of command used 'civilian control' as an exoneration from moral responsibility . . . . [The] war—or the non-war—was fought by the regulars, the 'professionals,' and these 'professionals' were more than willing to accept the role of automatons controlled by their civilian masters." --- Brig. Gen. Edwin Simmons

"It should be apparent by now to all but the most inveterate Nixon haters that the [Nixon] administration in Vietnam inherited an enormously complex, perhaps intractable problem . . . .

"By 1969, extreme measures of one kind or the other may have been required to end the war. The available evidence suggests that
the new administration rejected the extreme options out of hand because they thought such steps unnecessary." --- George Herring

"I think the centralized Presidential decision-making under Nixon and Kissinger was probably the most coherent policy-making we are ever going to get, whether you like the content of it or not. Of all the administrations that wrestled with this problem, Nixon had the least freedom of maneuver." --- Peter Rodman

"The apparent early success of Vietnamization, as well as real progress in the pacification program was part of the reason behind the Cambodian incursion." --- Stanley Falk

"[The] military were not really pushing for a Cambodian bombing at the beginning of '69. It really was the President who seized on this as a way of retaliating for the wave of attacks by the North Vietnamese in February '69 which was in violation of the bombing-halt understanding; we were looking for something to do other than resuming the bombing of the North.

What happened was that by the end of March and the beginning of April [1970], the North Vietnamese started expanding all over eastern Cambodia, and we were faced with a decision that could not be avoided. If we did nothing we would have been faced by... all of eastern Cambodia as a [North Vietnamese] base area. [Our] Vietnam strategy would have been totally unviable at that point." --- Peter Rodman

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THE NORTH VIETNAMESE AND THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE

"The initial response of the North Vietnamese leadership to the announcement [in 1965] that the United States, the most powerful military force on earth, was coming into the war, was utter disarray, utter anxiety, utter uncertainty. [The] dismaying conclusion to suggest itself from the 1972 Christmas bombing was that had this kind of air assault been launched in February of 1965, the Vietnam war as we know it might have been over within a matter of months, even weeks." --- Douglas Pike

"The idea that North Vietnam could not be bombed out of the war because of its fanaticism was folly. Japan was much more fanatic; they were bombed out of the war. The 1965 bombing was nothing like [what] had been recommended [by the Air Force]. Had it been carried out before the radar and the SAMs [were in place in the North], it would have been cheap, relatively uncostly to the U.S." --- Air Force historian

"In contrast to the 'living room war' image of the South Vietnamese soldier as cowardly and bumbling, ARVN paid dearly (nearly 200,000 killed, plus a half million wounded) for its campaign against the regular and guerrilla communist forces." --- Allan Goodman
"[We] Americans do not have a revolutionary vision for agarian societies . . . . I am inclined to doubt that there were 'lost opportunities' for the South Vietnamese to have saved themselves, at least not without an interminable American presence." — Stanley Karnow

"Post mortems on the fall of the GVN generally stress the impact of Communist violations of the Paris Agreement in 1973 and 1974 . . . and the waning political will in the United States to counter these violations. Such assessments obscure the fact that the GVN collapsed from within despite nearly two decades of massive American support and the steady erosion of VC control over and support in the countryside." — Allan Goodman

"To the end, the Republic of Vietnam was too much the creation of the Americans . . . ." — Russell Weigley

LESSONS AND NON-LESSONS OF THE U.S. EXPERIENCE IN VIETNAM

"Here, then, is the very wellspring of our strategic failure in Vietnam. The American people were deliberately excluded from their role in selecting the political object—the reason the war was being fought. Not only was there no declaration of war, but efforts were made to insure that the commitment of American troops to combat was made as imperceptibly as possible . . . . It is not surprising, therefore, that American resolve collapsed after Tet-68. What is surprising is that it did not collapse much sooner." — Col. Harry Summers

"The United States might be able to fight a limited war again, but only if it is not long and inconclusive." — Richard Betts

"You know what Napoleon said: 'God is on the side of the biggest battalions . . . .' And right about then [1974], God was on the side of the Communists; they were bigger, they were stronger. That's why they [ARVN] lost the war . . . .

"Maxwell Taylor was right [in 1965]: support them logistically. The next war we fight, we ought to do it like the Mafia: contract it out." — John Murray

"We small nations can end up losing higher stakes than the U.S. itself because for the American, you can turn the page and say, 'Well, it is an unhappy chapter for U.S. history.' But that is not the same for the South Vietnamese." — Ambassador Bui Diem

"The paradox is that the Vietnam War, so often condemned by its opponents as hideously immoral, may well have been the most moral or at least the most selfless war in all of American history. For the impulse guiding it was not to defeat an enemy or even to serve a national interest; it was simply not to abandon friends." — Ernest May

Most critics have exaggerated the differences between Kennedy's and Johnson's policies. For a quarter century, American policy in Indochina had vacillated between contrary objectives---preventing a Communist takeover while avoiding American involvement in a major war in Asia---but the contradiction between these two aims did not become acute until the mid-1960s, when Lyndon Johnson sharply escalated the war by committing U.S. combat forces. True, the commitments by JFK and LBJ differed markedly in scale, but the similarities between their approaches outweighed the differences, which were more a function of circumstances than objectives.

In 1961 and 1965, for instance, both Presidents increased U.S. involvement to prevent an imminent South Vietnamese collapse. Johnson's buildup greatly exceeded Kennedy's largely because the requirements to save South Vietnam in 1965 far exceeded those four years earlier. Kennedy was less willing to consider disengagement than later apologists suggested, and Johnson was less anxious to escalate than later detractors believed.

Both Presidents, moreover, chose a limited war strategy. Johnson in particular rejected the extreme military options in 1965-67 in order to avoid provoking a Chinese intervention, wrecking his Great Society programs, and confronting a full-scale domestic political revolt from either the Right or the Left.

Johnson adopted a centrist strategy that never promised victory partly because of a misapplication of limited war theory. On the tactical level, American-led counterinsurgency efforts successfully pacified most of the South Vietnamese countryside between 1968 and 1972. Yet on the strategic level, the doctrine of limited war failed to address the problems arising from the realities in Vietnam. For instance, the Washington theorists' concept of "graduated response," as manifested in the gradual escalation of the air war against the North in 1964-1967, greatly overestimated the possibilities for North-South compromise via negotiation in the Vietnamese civil war and gave the North an opportunity to build up effective air defenses.

While the Joint Chiefs of Staff never accepted this "graduated response" logic, the civilian leadership ignored their pessimistic
assessments of the situation in Vietnam, particularly because Kennedy and Johnson distrusted their objectivity. Civilians and generals, however, differed more over means than ends. Civilian leaders knew, for instance, that expanding troop commitments entailed high risks, but they saw no acceptable alternative to pressing on. In any case, the theory of the graduated bombing campaign captivated almost no one, including proponents of the air war; and every one regarded the ground war in the South as more important.

The errors of the air war strategy pale in significance beside the overarching decision—by Kennedy, Johnson, Bundy, Rostow, and, later, Kissinger—to keep the war effort, as a whole, limited in terms of strategy and manpower. Except for the military, virtually no Executive or Congressional figures in 1965-73 questioned the premise of limitation until the process of U.S. disengagement was well under way.

The open-ended nature of the war generated a public perception that the White House was wasting American power, lives, and prestige to no visible end. In the future, the United States may only be able to fight limited wars if they are not too long or inconclusive; this observation reinforces the U.S. military's inclination against "slow squeeze" rationales for the use of conventional forces. Ideally, leaders should also ascertain in advance a cut-off point, beyond which they will not go, before engaging in future overseas military ventures.

The most important yet most difficult judgment concerns one about American vital interests. Estimates of priorities cannot be made in a vacuum; they depend on what else is happening at the time. The dilemma is that the crucial phase of a commitment is in the early, formative period (1961-65 in Vietnam), when rhetoric becomes mortgaged and initial costs are sunk. Yet it is in this phase that the consequences are least clearly understood and the commitment is secondary to Soviet-American competition.

U.S. policy makers in the 1960s gambled that an open-ended, incremental commitment was preferable to the alternative of certain defeat. The results make clear the folly of this judgment. The dominant operative lesson of Vietnam is that national leaders should not make commitments abroad that they cannot fulfill without huge sacrifice. Yet containment of Communist expansion, the goal that drove the United States into Vietnam, remains a primary aim of American policy, and Reagan's assertive rhetoric recalls the international staunchness of the New Frontier. What has not rebounded to the same degree is the bipartisan consensus in favor of containment.

Policy makers today can draw few certain prescriptions for action from Vietnam. Kennedy and Johnson were perhaps wrong in stepping into the Indochinese quagmire, but they were not necessarily wrong in believing that failing to do so would have produced a bitter reaction at home and abroad.
Vietnam was a disaster for the United States even though our military forces won every major battle of the war. The American failure was both strategic and tactical: U.S. Presidents never clarified their overall objectives, and the military adopted strategy and operations that did not accord with the realities of the war they were allowed to fight.

The roots of the American defeat lay in Lyndon Johnson's perception of the Vietnam war as an integral part of the Cold War. While Vietnam itself had little strategic importance, Johnson perceived its defense as a symbolic test of American military commitments to its allies around the world. Seeking a political settlement that would "allow the South Vietnamese to determine their own future without outside interference," the President resolved to do the minimum amount militarily to prevent a South Vietnamese defeat while convincing Hanoi that it could not win without prohibitive costs.

Johnson's defensive strategy effectively left the decision on when to end the war in the hands of North Vietnam. In contrast, the Joint Chiefs of Staff favored an overwhelming bombing campaign against Hanoi and the interdiction of supply routes and sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. In order to help bring the seriousness of the war home to the American public, the JCS also supported the mobilization of the reserves.

Yet when Johnson searched for the elusive point where the political costs of the war would become unacceptable to the American people, he always settled upon mobilization of the reserves, which could jeopardize his Great Society programs. This domestic constraint, not any argument concerning military strategy, appears to have dictated Johnson's war policy. Nevertheless, none of the military leaders seriously threatened resignation in order to dramatize his opposition to the President's limitations on the conduct of the war.

The largely secret disagreement at the administration level on military strategy was mirrored on the ground in Vietnam at the tactical level. General Westmoreland's concept was a traditional military one, that of defeating the enemy's military forces and driving them from the battlefield. Once the American military put the search-and-destroy operations into effect and pursued the chimera of defeating the enemy in South Vietnam, military policy no longer coincided with national policy as dictated from Washington. The military's goal of defeating the enemy rather than merely
denying him victory opened the door to an indeterminate amount of additional force, yet the President would never provide the necessary level of forces for Westmoreland's concept of operations. The war became a protracted war of attrition which the United States could not win, for Johnson would not allow U.S. forces to pursue the enemy outside South Vietnam.

The buildup of U.S. forces and their takeover in an offensive role throughout Vietnam also denoted a total lack of U.S. confidence in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Until 1968, Americans seldom coordinated pacification programs with the Government of Vietnam (GVN), and the effects of military operations—uprooting the rural populace, concentrating it in refugee camps, destroying many aspects of traditional Vietnamese life—contradicted the objective of gaining popular support for the government. Consequently, the many spectacular American victories over Communist forces were never translated into political gains for the South Vietnamese government.

After the shock of the Tet Offensive, President Johnson became aware that most Americans would no longer accept more of the same. March 1968 marked a de facto turning point in U.S. policy in Vietnam: thereafter, the Johnson administration decided to limit the size of American forces and to improve Vietnamese forces so that they could take on the major burden of the fighting.

The United States did not stumble into Vietnam. Before every step, the President carefully weighed the alternative, limited each response, and took into account public opinion. While some analysts have claimed that the system "worked," this war was hardly a satisfactory decision-making process, worthy of emulation. The President and the JCS maintained a facade of unity that inhibited any rational debate in Congress or the body politic, and when debate did come in 1966-67, it was initiated by scattered groups of anti-war protesters who offered no policy alternatives.


How could President Johnson have committed such gross errors in tactics and strategy as he did in Vietnam? The reason was that he was more concerned with saving his domestic programs than choosing the best policy alternative in Vietnam.

Johnson's advisers did not mislead him, nor did he cow them into submission. In July 1965, when he made the crucial decision to commit large numbers of U.S. combat troops to Vietnam, Johnson
approached the advisory process not for advice but for political reasons. He sought to build a consensus and legitimacy outside the government by appearing to seek advice. The President had already made his mind up in early July, siding with Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara on the crucial issue of buildup (except that LBJ rejected his call for mobilizing the reserves). Between July 4 and 28, 1965, Johnson put in motion a debate on the war among his inner circle, even listening to George Ball make the case for a pullout, but the President always put the burden on proof on Ball, rather than McNamara. Ball always had to prove that the dominos would not fall; McNamara never had to prove that a negotiated settlement was possible within a reasonable time.

Johnson sought to avoid the real options—"get out or stay in and win"—by doing "what will be enough and not too much," in other words, to stay in and not lose. A primary constraint upon U.S. policy July 1965 was Johnson's belief that provocative military measures against the North would bring China into the war, but he never encouraged hard analysis of this assumption. (Actually, the CIA had studied the problem and judged that the North Chinese intervention was likely only if the U.S. invaded the North and that Soviet intervention was unlikely under any circumstances.) Similarly, Johnson never encouraged his aides to investigate discrepancies in U.S. estimates of enemy strategy because that would have entailed an implicit admission that the United States could not achieve its goals in Vietnam without drastically escalating the war.

Finally, the principal decision makers never questioned containment of Communism and the domino theory as basic premises of U.S. policy. They sought to maintain the Cold War consensus begun under Truman, but in 1965, they significantly expanded the definition of containment beyond the Soviet Union to include Vietnam. Washington became preoccupied with the question of how to save the government of South Vietnam, never asking why.

How did it happen? Because Lyndon Johnson dreamed of a Great Society, which he did not want to abandon in favor of a major war effort, and because he created a false consensus within the policy-making bureaucracy. In the end, the advisory process mattered only incidentally. Lyndon Johnson mattered a great deal.

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DISCUSSION

DOUGLAS BLAUFARB:

LBJ adopted JFK's decision to treat Laos as a separate
problem (and the Indochina War as several wars), and to maintain the provisional 1962 agreement agreement and the military stalemate there. We used the Meo tribesmen to balance off the Hanoi-run Pathet Lao in order to maintain this stalemate. We provided air support, Thai irregulars, and other aid on an ad hoc basis to the Meo until the mid-1970s. The objectives were: (1) to avoid the necessity for U.S. intervention with general forces in a forbidding area very close to North Vietnam and China; (2) to use Laos as an example of the type of settlement which might emerge in Vietnam.

We succeeded in the first instance, but failed in the second. The Laos formula worked as long as the North Vietnamese did not intervene decisively, but we failed to prevent North Vietnam's use of Laos as an infiltration route. In violation of the 1962 Geneva accords, intensive U.S. bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail from 1965 on slowed, but did not cut off, the equally illegal Communist flow of supplies and men through Laos; at best, it forced a partial shift to Cambodian routes for supplies. The whole arrangement was entirely ad hoc and provisional and collapsed when the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam.

DOUGLAS KINNARD:

Documentary evidence on the April 1965 period [when escalation was being studied] shows that the Johnson White House rarely consulted the Joint Chiefs of Staff. LBJ was already running the show on the war. General William Westmoreland, the U.S. field commander in Vietnam, merely repeated what General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the JCS, fed him from the White House, and (U.S. Ambassador to Saigon) Maxwell Taylor was already being excluded. The July 1965 decisions logically followed from this process.

PAUL MILES:

On the President's role in prompting military plans, it should be noted that in his message to Taylor (then U.S ambassador to Saigon) and Westmoreland on December 30, 1964, LBJ to Taylor's surprise once again declined to initiate bombing, but appeared open-minded about a far more hazardous course of action, a land war in Asia. LBJ's message catalyzed the JCS and Westmoreland into considering the commitment of division-sized forces to South Vietnam. Similarly, Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp (Commander-in-Chief, Pacific), in a message to Westmoreland on 11 June 1965, indicated that McNamara clearly favored an increase of U.S. forces over building up ARVN. In that sense, Westmoreland merely followed McNamara on the Americanization of the war.

On the strategic concept of the war, LBJ clearly discouraged contrary information, with the result that there was no independent analysis of the war by the JCS. In 1965, Westmoreland was only a field commander, and he did not achieve status as an independent