

Vietnam Reappraised

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IS: What are the primary political lessons of Vietnam?

Hoffmann: There are two principal political lessons of Vietnam. The first one concerns the relation of ends and means, and it is a lesson that can be learned not by the Vietnam experience only. There are some interesting comparisons with China after World War II. If one sets for oneself a very difficult political end, one has to determine very carefully that the means at one's disposal *can* reach that end. On the other hand, if the means turn out to be insufficient, one must be clear that the means that *might* be effective in reaching the desired end are politically acceptable to the American people, and that they do not create any external risks that far exceed the importance of the stakes in the area.

Lesson number one is that U.S. means, excessive as they were from all kinds of viewpoints, were never sufficient to oblige North Vietnam to cease and desist its involvement; the means that *might* have theoretically obliged the North Vietnamese to cease and desist, had the United States been willing to commit them, would have created for the United States real external dangers with potential adversaries and in relations with allies. Moreover, to harness those means to that task would have probably been unacceptable to a large fraction of the American public, because those means would have entailed either the annihilation of the North Vietnamese or a full-scale invasion.

The second lesson, which is of equal importance, concerns not the North, but the South. That lesson tells us that one's success in reaching one's end depends almost decisively on the solidity of the political base on which one operates. That is the major difference between the American commitment made in South Korea and the situation that the United States faced in Vietnam. To a very large extent, the American effort in South Vietnam was

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based on the gamble that somehow, by having the right kinds of policies, the United States could oblige South Vietnam to coalesce and to become something like a nation and a state. A correspondence between McGeorge Bundy and myself in 1965 dealt with precisely this theme.

One sub-lesson is that it is impossible to get a nation that is not a nation at the outset to coalesce, if the kind of war one wages destroys it in the process. The political foundations of the military effort need to be strong. If they are rotten, the likelihood that one will build them up with a war in progress is quite low.

Huntington: The two political lessons of the Vietnam experience that I would emphasize do not differ greatly from those of Professor Hoffmann.

One political lesson that we have learned is that we have to be more discriminating about the interests that we commit ourselves to defend by military force. The United States became involved in Vietnam in part because we were indiscriminate. Surveys of U.S. public opinion since Vietnam show that people now draw sharp distinctions between different parts of the world in terms of what we will defend by force. There are extraordinarily high levels of support, at least at the moment, for defending Western Europe and Japan, a rather mixed picture as far as the Persian Gulf and the Middle East is concerned, and relatively little support for the use of U.S. military forces elsewhere.

This seems to me to represent a rather realistic and sensible view of where American interests are.

The second political lesson concerns the dilemma of whether Vietnam was to be an American war or one of only supporting the South Vietnamese. The United States became deeply involved in efforts to create a political system in Vietnam. But the way in which we went about it—in terms of the various pacification and reform programs we tried to introduce—undermined the effort to create political stability. That is a dilemma that the United States was never able to resolve. We felt we had to get in more deeply, carrying out more and more reforms, taking responsibility away from the South Vietnamese. As a result, we ended up doing, in many respects, more damage to the political structures on our own side than was done to them by the Viet Cong.

May: The general proposition that the Vietnam experience most readily supports is that protracted and inconclusive ground warfare will not for a long period of time command public support. That seems to be a proposition for which one can find many other supporting examples. The American

experience in Korea supported it, as did the Boer War and, elsewhere, the French experience in Indochina and in Algeria. One can find very few examples that refute that proposition. Where exceptions exist, they seem to involve objectives that are clearly defensive, and where a fairly high level of idealism is involved, as in the American Revolution or the Irish Rebellion.

The proposition is still very general. One could infer from it that in the event of a situation requiring military force, the Vietnam experience argues for *not* limiting what one does, thus making sure that the result is neither inconclusive nor protracted. Alternatively, it is possible to argue—as was argued about prospective U.S. participation in Indochina at a time when this same lesson from the Korean War was vivid—that we should try to wage war just with air and naval forces.

It would be better if the operational inference drawn from Vietnam were somewhat broader. In analyzing a case that might seem to call for the application of military force, an effort could be made explicitly to see the domestic component as among the set of interests involved. The problem should be cast in those terms, if we have learned anything, and not in terms that characterize these domestic concerns as merely a *limitation* on action that is dictated by external interests.

Neustadt: When one considers changing one's policy aims, or the operational scale on which one is pursuing one's aims, it is dangerous to tamper with symbols that have mass psychological importance, and that help to validate, in the public understanding, the policy one is pursuing. It is dangerous unless one is prepared to substitute symbols that are equally supported and validated. In the Vietnam case, Diem was such a symbol. And there is a lot to be said for Henry Kissinger's old criticism that having gone in to support Diem, with Diem the only human embodiment of South Vietnam that most Americans had ever heard of, it was reckless in the extreme to do as the United States did in 1963, transferring its support from Diem to *any* government of South Vietnam.

Another important symbol was the seventeenth parallel, and yet another was the theme of Asians fighting Asians. All three of these limits, all at once, were removed in 1964–65, without anything equally satisfactory to put in their place by way of trying to attract mass political support.

Furthermore, building on Stanley Hoffmann's comment about South Vietnam, I regard General Westmoreland and Roger Hilsman as equally naive. The notions that either had of how to secure South Vietnam, either militarily or politically strike me as extraordinary. It was naive to claim that the United

States could achieve victory with limited means in a civil war on the Asian mainland. It was equally naive, I think, to assume that we could change or win the hearts and minds of people, democratize a country not remotely under our own control, and thus aim at nationhood through Siagon's government. American military forces and civilian bureaucracies are not finely-tuned enough for such assignments! That's a lesson.

Schelling: I also distinguish two kinds of lessons: "I told you so," and "I was surprised."

Most striking was the durability of the peaceful international system that existed. I spent the Spring of 1965 in London, and the only objection I heard voiced to escalation of the war to the North was that it would inevitably trigger Chinese intervention. It seems that the absolute impassivity of the Chinese and of the Russians throughout this enormous war—as well as the simultaneous unfolding of SALT and better relations with China—is fraught with lessons. By far, the worst fears of what might happen as a result of escalation proved groundless. That says something important about the contemporary relations of the United States, Russia, China.

The second lesson should have been clear by the post-election period in 1964. The fundamental premise on which the United States was in Vietnam was obsolete: that Vietnam was the cutting edge of China, which was the cutting edge of Moscow, in a nuclear-backed, monolithic, communist effort to enlarge the part of the world that, in a universalist way, they covered. The Sino-Soviet split should have been unmistakable. The notion that the seventeenth parallel was where we had to hold the line against Moscow was no longer valid. We ended up fighting an adversary that was more than enough for us, with or without Moscow behind it.

The fundamental idea was in the original Basic National Security Plan. It assumed incorrectly that since the seventeenth parallel was the line that Truman and Stalin had drawn, we had to fight to defend it against Moscow's pawn. If the time ever comes that the United States considers going into Africa or Latin America, we must be sure we remember that lesson and be sure we know who the enemy is against which we are prepared to fight.

Huntington: There are dangers to drawing too many lessons from Vietnam, and there are two grounds for this. First, Vietnam is a very distinct case. There was the unusual situation of an insurgency within South Vietnam itself, in addition to invading forces of the same nationality coming in from the outside. That alone differentiates Vietnam from all the other conflicts

with which it might be compared—Korea, Philippines, Malaysia, and so on. That peculiar combination meant fighting two different wars, and the United States never seemed to recognize that it had to have two different strategies. In the end, the United States won one of them, and fought the other to a stalemate.

Secondly, Vietnam was a part of the whole process of decolonization. It was, moreover, the only case in which a communist party established itself as *the* nationalist force in that process of decolonization. Even in China, it did not happen in quite the same way.

IS: *How do these relate to the military lessons?*

Schelling: The dependence on the host government also holds an important lesson. Of the contemporary examples, Vietnam is the nadir. If you move into an allied country with a first-rate army, like Germany, France, Britain, and perhaps Greece or Turkey, you may be well positioned. If you move into a place that has no forces with which you have to deal, it becomes a beach-head. The United States had the least authority over its ally in a place like Vietnam. That is especially true because of the corruptibility of political-military leaders and of having to work through a military system that could not be reformed.

I heard Daniel Ellsberg and Samuel Huntington debate in 1967, and I think they both agreed that there was no hope for the success of an American involvement unless the United States could reform the Vietnamese military forces. The difference was that Huntington thought that we could succeed in doing so, while Ellsberg thought that we could not. Basically, though, they foresaw even then that to do so was crucial, and the whole course of the war indicated how crucial it is.

Huntington: I would point to what Professor May has cited as the principal *political* lesson of Vietnam in illustration of the principal *military* lesson of that experience. That is that the United States, like other democracies, is not well equipped to fight lengthy limited wars. One must conclude from that, as May himself was reluctant to do, that we should tailor our strategy to this political fact. If we have to become involved in fighting limited conflicts elsewhere in the world, the most crucial limitation from our point of view is not the limitation on weapons or geographical scope or goals, but rather the limitation on *time*.

This puts a great premium on adopting a military strategy which, first of all, through the actual presence or very rapid deployment of U.S. forces, plays a role in deterring conflict and aggression. If that is not possible, we should be able to reach a quick decision through the application of military force. The lesson, in this sense, is the lesson that the strategy of graduated response, of creeping escalation, may not work militarily because the adversary can adapt to that type of strategy. The strategy certainly will not work militarily as far as the United States is concerned. I do not believe that we have really faced up to this fact in our military thinking.

May: The military lesson, as it was drawn from Korea, was "do not cross parallels." The military lesson that can be taken from Vietnam might be better called an administrative lesson. It is, "do not expect one mission to be accomplished by forces that were designed for another." That is something for which one can find a lot of illustrations.

The potential for applying that lesson to practice is worrisome: It dictates that when you order military forces, you must either build a force that will meet *any* contingency that one might imagine, or alternatively, that you cannot do anything unless you have forces that were *specifically* designed and trained for the contingency that develops.

We ought to be thinking about the narrower military lessons, recognizing that Vietnam illustrated that existing forces are unlikely to be designed for, equipped for, and trained to do what particular circumstances call for. We should then be thinking about whether what we would like to see happen militarily can imaginably be accomplished by the forces that we have.

Neustadt: Professor May's first point, that you cannot fight a long war, does not reckon with the volunteer army. The Nixon Administration was very clear on that point: to give yourself a *chance* of fighting a lengthy limited war, you must get away from conscripts. Inflation has vastly boosted the cost of the volunteer army, but this was not foreseen.

Two other factors intervene. First, Vietnam was the first televised war. And that was before mini-cameras or satellites. Nowadays, with these, the only other thing you need is transmission equipment. As a result, it becomes important to ask the question, when you think of sending volunteers somewhere, can you keep transmission equipment out?

Second, what are the consequences of protracted conflict going to be on the morale, competence, manning, and composition of the military forces? The consequences of the Vietnam conflict for the U.S. Army as an institution were very grave, and never calculated in advance.

Schelling: I am still impressed by the enormous quantity of money, people, and technology that was poured into Vietnam, and by the fact that it did not do the job. If in 1964 one had added up what the United States was going to commit—everything from B-52s to the latest in fighter aircraft and ultimately “smart bombs” and electronic fences—anybody would have said, “you don’t need sixty-four times as much as you think it will take.”

We committed enough to sink the country, and I think America slowly realized that it would always take more. One would have to go back and imagine 1964, when McNamara had his little pictures of barbed wire fences around those “pacified strategic hamlets,” to realize how astounding it is in retrospect that all that material and all those people and all that money could not do the job.

Americans might have learned it without the war. By now, we have discovered that two-bit territories can handle some of the most sophisticated kinds of equipment, communications, sensors, explosive devices and the like. We have seen countries like Iraq and Syria develop to the point where they have more operating tanks in the field than does the United States. Still, what we witnessed with Vietnam was the end of the era in which one could believe that a great industrial power is *bound* to win when it fights a small, poor, backward country.

May: The American military establishment, in the 1960s and now, did not exist to fight that kind of conflict. All of the services had become, by the end of the 1950s, essentially artificial markets for the producers of high-technology equipment. The problem in Vietnam bore very little relationship to the kinds of things that really occupied the people at the top of the services. The whole reward system worked against addressing the real problem of Vietnam. The problem posed there is not unimportant. It was essentially a police problem. Accordingly, it had predictable characteristics—an enemy that is hard to find, a messiness that makes planning difficult, and a certain amount of inevitable brutality.

The measurement of success in Vietnam was the *police* measure of success, and not the standard military criterion for success. It was not victory in battle; it was *quiet*.

Huntington: It is important to distinguish between the different wars that were being fought. There was the big-unit war with the North Vietnamese; and there was the Viet Cong war, dealing with the areas of South Vietnam that had been controlled by the Viet Cong since 1940. In 1967, I compared

a map of the areas in Vietnam then controlled by the Viet Cong with a map of areas controlled by the Viet Cong in 1954: those areas were identical.

Then there was a third war, which was very much a terrorist war. . . .

Hoffmann: That raises a very interesting question for the future. When one is talking about limited war, and particularly in cases of wars that have this kind of police function, each one is *sui generis*. Forces designed to fight a major technological war against the main opponent are fairly fungible; forces that are supposed to fight low-intensity wars are not. A force that would have been perfectly equipped to fight in Vietnam is not usable as such in the Persian Gulf. A force for the Persian Gulf is not the one that one would want to introduce into the Caribbean or Central America. This puts into sharp relief the policing problems of the leading conservative, or *status quo* superpower, because it is not that superpower that chooses the terrain on which to fight.

Those who talk about the primary role of military force have never really faced that problem. If indeed we look at force as not just the *basis* for policy, but at the same time, as a *main instrument*, we are in very serious trouble.

Huntington: In Vietnam, as in Korea, the military was operating under very severe restrictions from their point of view. American forces were applying force in a limited way. This has its effects not only on our own military actions; it also has effects on what the enemy does.

Hoffmann: Wars of liberation, or guerrilla wars, are always extraordinarily difficult for soldiers to fight. And they are particularly demoralizing for an army when the stakes are not very clear. One comes to the same conclusion looking at the French in Algeria, where the stakes *were* fairly clear. Nothing is more destructive of army morale than being in a situation in which it is nearly impossible to distinguish the good guys from the bad guys; in which one does not know whether the terrain on which one fights is yours or theirs. Particularly when the stakes are unclear or seem very distant, such a war seems to be more than one can demand of one's soldiers. This is true whether they are a professional army or an all-volunteer one. The French army that fought in Indochina was not a conscript army. And yet one witnessed the same demoralization.

The second aspect concerns problems of rationality and problems of failure. American leaders had a certain notion of rationality. They sent troops to Vietnam at first in order to deter, and then, if the deterrent effect failed,

enough to attain a workable compromise. What Americans did not ask themselves, and herein lies an important lesson, is "What do we do next if it does not work?" The question remains not only if our commitment fails to deter, but if the other side, in spite of the overwhelming show of U.S. force, simply does not compromise and give up?

One of the military lessons to be learned is the need to build into one's discussions, options, and calculations such questions: What if it does not work? Where do we stand then? What are the costs of retreating? That is crucial, because a fighting army that is not reaching any of its political objectives is an army that *will* get demoralized very quickly. Secondly, addressing these questions is important because the domestic base erodes. There was the same problem with the end of Korea, when the public started asking very sharp questions, because the objective had not seemed to have been reached. One of these objectives was, notably, some kind of settlement.

Huntington: I do not quite understand the reference to deterrence in the Vietnam context. The United States clearly did not use military forces in a deterrent way, and indeed, I do not see how we could have. There was an ongoing conflict there; it was not a case of deploying forces in Berlin or Germany or elsewhere, which essentially serves a deterrent function. That is why I emphasize the desirability in any future conflict—and particularly one in which the Soviets might be involved—of having U.S. forces arrive first. The party that is on the ground first has the advantage of forcing the opponent to come in shooting. The fact that American and Soviet soldiers have not shot at each other in thirty-five years of cold war is very important. There is a taboo, in a sense, which each side will be reluctant to break. The effectiveness of deterrence is precisely that the opponent is unsure of what the other side's response will be—where the limits are at which an adversary will act decisively.

In Vietnam, the opponent could calculate more or less what would happen in response to its actions. If they broke off the Paris Talks and went home, we would increase the bombing to a certain level, and they could come to the decision that they could live with that. That made deterrence ineffective.

Hoffmann: What I meant by "deterrent" was this: When the United States started introducing large numbers of advisers, and then forces, the opponent was already there. (It was, moreover, partly a civil war). One of the purposes was to deter the North Vietnamese from further infiltration. There were all kinds of discussions, as late as 1967, about levels of acceptable infiltration. So there was, to some extent, a deterring purpose.

Secondly, while the general point about being there first is valid, the one place that that was not possible was Vietnam, because of the Geneva Agreements.

IS: *Could these lessons not have been learned before the major U.S. commitment?*

Schelling: In discussing the lessons of Vietnam, we should include those lessons from Vietnam before 1963. It could be that some of these lessons were already learned, and we had no access, no interest, no willingness, to go into them. In 1965, a French sociologist described what was one of the most dreadful experiences in both Algeria and Indochina. That was the tendency of troops to become brutalized progressively by coping both with frustration and with an enemy that itself acted in a way that was interpretable as brutal. He discussed the importance then of the motivation for even such acts as mutilating bodies. It was to de-personify the enemy. It helps, he pointed out, if the enemy is of a different race, and the soldier at least does not identify a common humanity. It was particularly schizophrenic if the enemy and the good guys to be defended were the same; one had, simultaneously, to think that these were inhuman beasts and those whose culture we are defending. The sociologist suggested that in retrospect, what had ultimately made it impossible in Algeria was that the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN), either deliberately or unwittingly, had goaded the French forces into a position where they were losing all of their self-respect and all of their sense of humanity, and convinced them in turn that it had become a pretense that Algeria was part of France. It was inevitable that in continuing to believe that, and fight for it, they would have destroyed *Algérie Francaise* in the process. It may be that that is what happened to the United States. It suggests that if you do not have a battlefield like Europe, this problem of irrational brutality will endure.

May: If the conflict had ended in 1963, from the American standpoint, much of the argument about the errors of analysis simply would not be made. This would have been especially so if the outcome had been, as was hoped in the early 1960s, something like what it had been in the case of the Philippines. There, a very small investment of force produced a desired result, however it was rationalized. The problem here though, as has already been pointed out, was the mismatch of means to the end.

Hoffmann: It seemed fairly clear in 1963 already that Vietnam was neither Malaysia nor the Philippines. The victory of the British in the former reflected

the ethnic composition of Malaysia. There were similar good reasons for the victory in the Philippines which did not apply in Vietnam. In fact, an earlier question regarding Vietnam had been whether South Vietnam was a nation or a fiction. And to the extent to which it was a fiction, the American effort was, as Walzer puts it, an exercise in ventriloquy. We convinced ourselves that since we wanted there to be a place which would be South Vietnam free of communism, it was therefore there already. And if it wasn't there by 1963–64, there must have been more profound reasons for that fact than we are willing to admit.

Schelling: There was a poverty of knowledge about Vietnam, unlike the Soviet Union, which had been studied for some thirty years by professional Kremlinologists and historians. It would have been difficult to choose any place of comparable importance about which so little was known as about Vietnam. There was a quality of benightedness, not only among the populace, but even among those in foreign policy. This was almost unique to dealing with North Vietnam.

Hoffmann: Michel Crozier points out that there were large numbers of people who knew something about Vietnam. But they happened to be French. And that disqualified them *ipso facto*, since the United States was not France, and was not a colonial power.

Crozier describes a visit to South Vietnam, just at the time when the United States was "taking over" from the French. What shocked him, he observed, was the total ignorance of the Americans, and their marvelous self-confidence in being able to guide this country, in addition to a total unwillingness to speak to any of the departing French, because they were tainted. So it is not that there was universal ignorance. Rather, the one source of knowledge that existed went unheeded.

Neustadt: That's an American administrative habit, as deeply rooted as Democrats and Republicans. There is little historical memory in the American government; there is no reason to expect Americans to look for it in any other government.

Schelling: There is always the paradoxical lesson that lessons are never learned. Of all the lessons that came out of World War II, the most important was that strategic bombing just did not do what people thought it would do, or even what people thought it was doing. In retrospect, the main thing that strategic bombing did was something that had never been noticed, which was to force the Germans to put a third of their war effort into air defense.

That may have been more than enough to justify strategic bombing; but in terms of what it destroyed, it was very questionable, when it was all over, that it had been worthwhile. Alain Enthoven's office calculated that one bomb in twenty was a dud in Vietnam, and that it delivered five hundred pounds of high explosive that the Viet Cong could get by disassembling the bombs. The other nineteen rarely hurt anybody, so all the United States was doing was delivering ammunition to the North Vietnamese. Maybe it was then that we should have discovered that what is important is not *how much* you pour in, but rather that it is *what* you do with what you put in.

I would also point out another interesting point. Except for a brief moment in 1967, I do not think nuclear weapons were ever broached as relevant. There were studies done and there were a few people that tried to make them come out relevant. It is interesting that the quietus on nuclear weapons survived almost without being noticed. Khrushchev was right in 1960. He said that democracies were soft and could not fight against wars of liberation. I think maybe what he meant, although we express it otherwise, is the point that we have made here.

IS: In what way did incorrect political analysis affect the U.S. commitment?

Hoffmann: What we all seem to be claiming, in different ways, is that the cardinal sin in these cases is the misanalysis of local circumstances. We are suggesting that if one fights a war because of causal chains of generalizations that simply do not hold in the particular circumstances of the place, then one can end up in terrible trouble.

Huntington: There's an additional problem. You may have the right analysis. If you draw from that analysis the conclusion that you have to intervene or take some action, however, you may have to sell it in such a way as to create the misimpression that it is the Soviet Union that you are fighting. That is what the United States has been doing ever since the Truman Doctrine. In a sense, Walt Rostow was right in that North Vietnam, if not a satellite, was certainly an ally of China and the Soviet Union. Maybe less so than some people thought, but that is not really central to drawing a lesson from Vietnam. The lesson was that even if Vietnam *was* a total satellite of the Soviet Union, that was not the place to fight the Soviet Union.

Schelling: Then perhaps we should draw two lessons. If it were the case that Vietnam *would have been* the place to fight the Soviet Union, if, in other

words, fighting Vietnam *was* fighting the Soviet Union—then there were two things wrong: 1) Fighting Vietnam was *not* fighting the Soviet Union, so the issue is irrelevant, and 2) If that *was* fighting the Soviet Union, that was not where to fight them. What Walt Rostow was saying was, “because condition *A* exists, we must engage in *B*.” I would hold that Condition *A* did not exist at the time, and Sam Huntington is saying, even had it had existed, *B* did not follow.

This raises questions if one is talking about the Congo, El Salvador, Cuban intervention in the Horn of Africa, or Latin America. It is important to be clear in expressing why one is taking some interventionary action. That means being clear about whether one is doing this because it would otherwise give a toe-hold to the Soviet Union, or give a toe-hold to the Cubans, or give a toe-hold to somebody on whom the Cubans would like to have their own toe-hold.

Hoffmann: The international system, and especially U.S.-Soviet relations, held together during those years because we never really quite tested its limits, we were very careful not to cross them. We do not know to this day what would have happened if we had. If we had invaded the North in strength, or if we had launched a massive bombing campaign of the Chinese border, can we be quite so sure that the Chinese would have remained indifferent?

Schelling: What we actually *did* was what everyone with whom I had spoken in Britain’s Labor Government was convinced was more than enough. It was said that if American aircraft ever went north of Hanoi, the Chinese would be *impelled* to intervene. But still, there were aircraft flying toward China, within five seconds of crossing the border. And there were one hundred border crossings recorded in the newspapers anyway. Although there were bound to be limits to the stability, those limits were grossly underestimated.

Huntington: The South Vietnamese connection with China and with Russia appeared to be the decisive threat, whereas it always seemed to me that the decisive consideration was what was going on in the South. If that was not in good order, there was very little we could do about it.

Neustadt: I think it will be shown when all the documents are available that the United States started down the track of direct intervention because of surprise on the American part that the South Vietnamese created a regime at all. That really marked the beginning of all the trouble.

We were astonished by Diem's ability to survive in the early years. It is a little like having a dummy that suddenly comes to life, and you are so astounded by it that you keep poking it, and thinking it is going to stay alive.

There is a further point that we have not mentioned. If one looks at the period from 1961–63, it is administratively a light-minded operation, receiving relatively little attention from the top levels of the U.S. government. It was a period characterized by on-again off-again, casual kind of decision-making on the subject of the Vietnam involvement. And there certainly is a lesson in that. If you are going to intervene with force abroad, you should not think about it once every two or three months, or as little as possible.

Hoffmann: That raises the question of whether all this light-headedness was due to the fact that things were going reasonably well, or was it due to the fact that we did not consider that the stakes were all that important.

IS: What is "victory" in a conflict such as this?

Schelling: It may be that the old slogan, "there is no substitute for victory," is neither right nor wrong, but *sometimes* right. One of the difficulties in Vietnam was that there was no substitute for victory. There was no easy way to see that a compromise was a stable outcome, and that if the United States had no intention of winning victory, then it was in an endless, if not a losing, situation.

Secondly, if you conclude that victory is impossible, then how do you identify those few points, if there are any, at which you may "cut and run"? Right after the Tet Offensive, Washington was full of people who had been enthusiasts of the war for several years who were discovering that they had been against it since even before the Tet offensive. Because this was a wholly demoralizing set-back, particularly to the aspirations and pretensions of military intelligence, it was an easy time to come out and say, "I told you so." What may have happened was that, unfortunately, it turned out that it had been enough of a set-back for the other side too. And so, neither side took advantage of the occasion to develop a consensus, and go to the president and say, "we shouldn't be there."

Is there any way to identify one of those rare moments when maybe, if you take advantage of it, you can get out? The late spring of 1968 may have been one of those times. I think President Johnson indeed gave Richard Nixon an opportunity, and there Nixon acted wisely but wrong—which was

to say, "Here's a great opportunity. We want to be sure to do it right, and right means nothing precipitous, nothing disgraceful, set up the best holding operation possible indigenously and get out 'with honor.'" That approach *may* be just as much of a quagmire as getting in in the first place.

One of the rules of such a war therefore, may be that if you ever see an opening, and you are flying up there in the clouds running out of gasoline, dive!

Hoffmann: I do not think it is fair to assert that the United States did not want victory. The problem was not that the United States did not decide to win. The problem was, what does winning entail? The United States, in all official proclamations, and in both administrations, simply said that victory meant getting the North to leave the South alone. That was indeed on paper a perfectly reasonable definition.

The problem was that, if we defined victory that way, the next step was in determining what it would take to realize it.

Schelling: I was thinking of victory in the MacArthur sense of victory—as something irreversible. What the United States aspired for in Vietnam, though, was simply reversible. That is, to enforce a victory was bound to be an interminable commitment.

The lesson that may need to be learned over—a lesson that perhaps no one can ever apply—is the extraordinary difficulty of pulling out of a situation in which one has invested heavily. Whatever the reasons why the United States got into Vietnam, the ultimate reason that we were in there from late 1965 until the time we finally evacuated was that nobody could think of a graceful way of getting out. The reason for being there, and it appealed to me, was "I wish now, with hindsight, that we hadn't done it, but now that we're here, among all the options, cutting and going just doesn't look good." It may be that one of the peculiar difficulties of our kind of democracy is that this self-contradictory reversal is typically considered just not available.

Lyndon Johnson came as close as one might to demonstrating a principle that I have quoted from Ernest May on a number of occasions. That is that no government ever surrenders the war that it fought. Some new government always has to come in to do the surrendering. And maybe Lyndon Johnson displayed how one can miss the opportunity, and that they do not come often.

Huntington: Meanwhile, victory was taken to mean making the North leave the South alone. The only way to accomplish that was to completely destroy

their war-making capability. That was a commitment that the United States was not willing to make.

Hoffmann: But if we really meant complete victory, it meant destroying the North, or alternatively being perpetually willing to re-intervene if the North persisted in re-intervening. So if one was not going in unrestrainedly, and to stay, then one should not have gone in.

One always returns to the question of subjecting one's actions to the toughness of political analysis. And then, it is quite unfair to blame the military for the failure. It is a civilian fault. The military was treated most shabbily—not that they did not make their own mistakes. But what else were they expected to do? It was not the kind of war to which they were accustomed. Needless to say, as one always does when one fights, one does what one knows what to do, even if it is inappropriate.

It is up to the civilians to think about what a war like this does to the army, and to the domestic consensus, if it does not work. One of the great lessons of the Vietnam experience is that in wars of that sort, relations between the military and the civilians are likely to be extremely tense.

Neustadt: It would be interesting to ask senior military officers to think hard about the operational risks to which their profession is going to be subjected in such enterprises in the future. This runs right against one of the great beliefs of the profession—that the military is answerable to the civilians.

One final point about "getting out." I do not think that the U.S. government ever seriously studied the option of getting out of Vietnam. Nobody insisted on having that option seriously explored. It was always taken to be unacceptable on the face of it. And it is one of the most distressing aspects of the NSC staff's role in Vietnam. At no point was the question of how the United States would get out, in a way that was administratively and politically most desirable, really addressed.

IS: *Does this suggest that it was feasible to study withdrawal? For constitutional or for political reasons, is it inevitable that preparation for withdrawal cannot be done?*

Neustadt: In the government, as it then existed, it was feasible, and was not done. Whether in the government as it now stands, which leaks from every pore, it would still be feasible, is less certain.

Schelling: Let me draw an analogy. I think one of these years, the President of the United States is going, overnight, to impose direct controls on wages and prices. And I think he will complicate it because it will never have been studied fully. The reason it will not have been studied is that the President cannot *allow* it to be so studied. He cannot allow anybody to know that he might be getting ready for it.

To officially and seriously ask people during Vietnam to make plans to pull the rug out from under those that were over there fighting would be highly sensitive—not only with respect to what leaks to the enemy, but what leaks to one's own people, and to one's political opponents. To acknowledge withdrawal as a responsible thing to study plays into the hands of those who already want to get out, and only want you to admit in principle that it is a respectable option, thereby giving them bargaining power. For that reason, to talk about the need to set up a procedure in which you will always examine the third option, is to ask the impossible. A leader cannot *permit* that. This may not be peculiar to democracies. It may be just as hard in the Soviet Union, or in Egypt, or in Israel, to talk about the possibility that the whole government, including, especially, the leader, whether it's Lyndon Johnson or Sadat or Brezhnev, has committed a mammoth error—perhaps of moral judgment as well as of tactics. One has to consider this a sort of constitutional deficiency in most governments, unless it can be done unofficially. This would require people that volunteer to go off and study the problem saying, "I know that my president could never acquiesce in my doing this at his request. I won't even ask him if he wants it done, because it would be unfair to require him to give an answer." But to do this isn't possible if it requires classified access.

Hoffmann: It could be done, theoretically, by the next administration. And in the case of Vietnam, we were dealing with a war that was fought under two administrations.

Schelling: That's why LBJ set up the opportunity, and it just wasn't taken. . . . It's as if Hirohito had decided to fight on after Nagasaki.

Hoffmann: This is not unlike the Algerian case. One could again say that there were two different administrations. There was the Fourth Republic, and there was DeGaulle. But DeGaulle, upon taking over, did exactly what we have just declared impossible—on the one hand, all the official proclamations spoke of a satisfactory end, "the Most French solution," and so on.

At the same time, he ordered the government to study all the options, including the opposing one to the official line. The more that one of those options seemed to be the only possible solution, the more he narrowed the gap between the official rhetoric and that particular option.

It took a certain amount of skill, certainly. But it was possible to do it. Still, the point is well taken that it *was* possible to do it only because he had inherited the war.

May: It is also possible to argue, at least on the evidence we have, that *no* options were really analyzed, with the possible exception of the escalation option.

IS: *What do you anticipate to be the role of Congress in U.S. decision-making regarding intervention in the future? What influences will Congress exert? What constraints is it likely to impose?*

May: We are likely to see an accelerating withdrawal from responsibility on the part of the Congress. They are going to resist consultation. Theirs would be more the position that the Executive should decide how to react in such instances.

Neustadt: The Congress will revert to wanting to react, to not wanting to take responsibility. Any notion that the lessons of Vietnam are going to be burned so sharply into Congressional and public conscience as to deeply influence decisions regarding the Middle East or Central and South America will just not endure. Vietnam will not disappear totally in ten years, as Korea did. But that *is* the tendency. It may be revived when a certain cadre of people enter their fifties. But the notion of a popular or a congressional psychology changing—as might have been the case with a whole generation after Munich—seems to be false.

Huntington: As far as Vietnam influencing presidential decision-making, I doubt that it will play a great role in the coming years. Given the temper of the times and of the public and the Congress, people will be forgetting Vietnam. There is, in addition, a revisionist literature in the works on Vietnam, which may change some of the images and the lessons that have seemed appropriate to draw in the past. Not until the late 1980s and early 1990s will the generation of those burned by the Vietnam experience while in their twenties be coming to power in the government. At that point,

Vietnam could begin to be a factor playing a major role in American decision-making.

During the next few years, I do not see Congress playing a major role with respect to decisions on military intervention. It is amazing how Congress has receded across the board on that score. When Carter invoked the loop-hole provision in the Arms Export Act a couple of years ago to rush \$400 million worth of arms to Yemen, no one complained, with the exception of an article on the Op Ed page of *The New York Times* by Arthur Schlesinger. A few years earlier, such a presidential action would have been unthinkable. In short, it seems that Congress will be generally passive on these issues over the next few years.

Schelling: But if the question of drafting troops arises, the Congress will become deeply involved. It *has* to be, because legislation would be required. This is a point on which Congress is even more sensitive to pressures from the constituency than the President can be. Such questions as whether conscripts can be sent overseas, or whether that would require new legislation, may appear. The Congress currently, rather perfunctorily, authorizes force levels for the four services every year. It does not authorize their going overseas, although in a lot of draft laws there have been restrictions on whether people can be sent overseas without specific authorization, or whether they can go overseas before six months are up, and so on. There is inevitably the question of drafting doctors, and whether certain people or groups can be exempted, in short, whether such a draft will be selective or non-selective. These things are bound to make military affairs a major consideration of the Congress. There is almost nothing that gets the public—both parents and children—as well as newspapers and the media—involved as does the draft.

Huntington: The whole question of the draft and conscription will come up in any event. At some point in the next four years, it's going to be on the Congressional agenda, and even though the Reagan Administration says it does not want to re-establish the draft, it will have to confront the issue. When it does, the outcome will tie in with the crisis at hand at that particular point.

IS: *This brings the discussion to the connection between the Vietnam experience and current U.S. policies. How is Vietnam now being interpreted? What lessons can be applied to current trouble-spots?*

Schelling: Despite the column of dominoes that has recently been discovered spiralling outward from El Salvador, I cannot yet believe anything as preposterous as military intervention in Central America is more than a remote contingency into which the United States could blunder. I am relying on the better judgment of the armed services to keep us out. We may need some cleverness to stay out, because if the ultimate enemy is one-half as diabolically motivated toward Communist Imperialism as we have recently been told, nothing should bring grins to the enemies' faces like seeing the United States destroy whatever image it has in this hemisphere for prudence, statesmanship, and respect toward the less strident regimes. Of course, we haven't the troops for real military action, unless we bring them home from Europe or Asia, or abandon any thought of increasing our commitment in the Middle East, or unless Congress is asked to restore the draft. I do not worry about draft resistance if the President wanted to send young people to Central America; I think it will occur in the Congress, not at the registration centers.

The serious problems are the oil fields of the Middle East, and Poland, and they are tightly related. The West was substantially paralyzed during the Hungarian uprising of 1956 because of the embarrassing Suez fiasco. Poland makes it difficult to pull forces out of Europe for a Middle East emergency. If an invasion of Poland spilled over into difficulty in East Germany or Czechoslovakia, the Russians might come to feel that everything they might have lost by military action in the Persian Gulf they were losing anyway, so that the gains looked free for the taking.

Some kind of military activity in and around the Middle East may become inescapable. If it does, we can't afford to have the country bitter and divided in advance over some sordid adventure in Central America. If El Salvador is a "warming-up exercise" it's going to be the kind of inflammation that we don't need. What the Administration is going to need in the Middle East is the confidence that anything that the President asks be done is seen as absolutely necessary and that the risks have been responsibly pondered. Ideology should not be involved, only an unmistakable national need and an undeniable international obligation.

Neustadt: My guess is that the present administration will be keeping clearly in mind one lesson mentioned earlier—that is, how to keep television coverage under control. That may mean getting wars, or states of war, declared. The whole balance of importance shifts in such a case, from not declaring in order to deceive your public about how big the commitment is, to doing so

for that same reason. The coverage of Vietnam was nothing compared to what it could be today, where it is an escalating problem. That is an issue that this administration will certainly think about.

It is clear today that South America is different from Vietnam, on account of the Monroe Doctrine. The Middle East is different because of either Israel or oil, or both. Hardly any American had ever heard of Vietnam, to say nothing of Laos or Cambodia, although French Indochina was vaguely familiar. That may be true of some South American countries. But it is not true of Middle Eastern oil states or Israel. And it is not true of South America *per se*. This is a significant difference in public and Congressional perception.

May: The lessons that can be drawn from Vietnam would be different depending on where the problem existed for which we were reviewing those lessons. If it were in Southeast Asia, Vietnam would spring immediately to mind, and the lesson that would be drawn would probably be that we shouldn't be involved there. Elsewhere, it will be said by many people that the situation is so unlike Vietnam that one really should not apply the lessons of Vietnam, other than those sub-lessons that bear specific resemblances to the situation at hand.

In the future, I think there will be more people talking about the importance of Congressional consultation in the executive branch. And there is likely to be more pollster consultation and sensitivity to public reaction, not only because of the lessons of Vietnam, but also because of the changes that have taken place in the structure of the presidency. Vietnam taught us the political moral that early on, we will have to analyze, in light of the political interests at stake, what the domestic political price is likely to be over the long run.

In to the early sixties there was every evidence that involvement in Vietnam had general public and congressional support. It did not seem inappropriate as a measure of U.S. interest. Not until after 1965 is there evidence of thinking about what the situation ahead might be. That kind of myopia in the initial stages of such an involvement will certainly need to be corrected as the United States considers the range of conflicts into which it might choose to enter. In a future decision on the question of intervention, there would be likely to be more thought as to this question of what should be done if actions initiated by the United States don't work: how do we get out? The set of circumstances and the strength of preferences with which those at the top of government would be working would vary to the extent that certain questions and options were studied thoroughly.

Hoffmann: The two lessons that I believe the new administration, given its cast of characters, will derive from Vietnam are the following: First, do not go in for complicated questions of regimes, or supporting one faction against another. But do go in for clear, strategic purposes, comprehensible to all. So the purpose is not going to be to let South Vietnam live. Our purposes will be American strategic interests. And one can find a number of places in the world where such an argument could be valid. Needless to say, the Middle East is one of them. What is more graphic than oil lines of communication? One could even make the same argument about parts of Central America. It is not that the United States would be supporting a dubious regime against people who might turn out to have ideals rather close to those of many Americans. It would be rather that there are very rich strategic interests that the United States must protect from the Cubans, for example. There is going to be a change, then, in the definition of the objectives as a result of Vietnam, if we have learned anything.

Secondly, when the United States introduces itself into a country or a conflict, the lesson may be drawn by the present Administration that we should go all-out—no more complicated exercises in limited war or excessively rational calculations of escalation thresholds, etc. When the United States does go into something, it will go in to *win*, and that means with all the forces necessary, including, if it turns out to be necessary, at least the *threat* of using nuclear weapons. That particular threat would not be relevant to Central America, but it could play a part in the Middle East.

This might be the case if there's a threat of disintegration in Iran, and American forces have to go in and occupy the strategic parts of Iran. For evidence of this kind of thinking, look at Secretary Haig's confirmation testimony. It was very clear. We need forces capable of grabbing and holding strategically important territory.

These are, for the present administration, going to be the lessons of Vietnam.

Huntington: In the coming years, intervention with U.S. military forces in third world conflicts could serve four different purposes in four different contexts:

- first, to prevent, defeat, or reverse a *coup d'état* against a friendly government;
- second, to support a friendly government against a prolonged insurgency or to support an insurgency against a hostile government or Soviet/proxy occupying army;

- third, to help a friendly government in a local interstate war; and
- fourth, to help a friendly government against invasion by Soviet/proxy forces.

The order of these contingencies reflects ascending levels of violence. The two principal U.S. military involvements since World War II were in the mid-range of this scale. The Korean War was a clear Contingency Three case; the Vietnam War was a combination of Contingencies Two and Three. Insurrections and local wars are highly probable in many areas of the Third World in the coming years. The probability and desirability of intervention by U.S. military forces in such conflicts is, however, reasonably low. The U.S. may often find it in its interests, as in El Salvador, to provide advice, training, money, and equipment to one side or another in an insurrectionary conflict or local war. In the absence of direct involvement of Soviet or proxy military forces in such conflicts, the U.S. is not likely, however, to find it militarily necessary, diplomatically desirable, or politically feasible to intervene with U.S. forces in such conflicts. The need and justification for the use of U.S. forces in combat will thus vary directly with the extent to which Soviet, Cuban, East German, or other non-local proxy forces participate in the conflict. The only likely exception to this rule would be where a local war or prolonged insurrection immediately threatened a very specific and concrete vital U.S. interest, such as an insurrection in Panama that endangered the security of the canal or an Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia that threatened the security of the oil fields.

Contingency Four clearly poses the most serious type of military conflict and the most dangerous possibilities of further escalation. The possible need to counter Soviet forces has become the principal focus of U.S. military planning for the Persian Gulf. The development of the capabilities—a military presence, pre-positioned equipment, access to local bases, air and sea transport, the Rapid Deployment Force—necessary to make a credible riposte to Soviet military action will also help to deter such action. In addition to the Persian Gulf, however, Soviet military action is also possible against China. While the United States is devoting considerable attention to how to respond to a Soviet drive into Iran, it is devoting very little to how it might respond to a Soviet drive into Manchuria or to how it might reduce the possibility of such an attack taking place.

Finally, a high probability exists of *coups d'état* in friendly third world states, particularly against the conservative regimes in the Persian Gulf. These coups could originate with either radical Marxist elements or Islamic

fundamentalist elements in the officer corps of those countries. The extent to which such coups would bring to power regimes hostile to U.S. interests is difficult to predict; it does seem clear, however, that *any* post-coup regime in a conservative Persian Gulf state will be less sympathetic to U.S. interests and more open to Soviet influence than the current regime in that state. By their very nature coups are difficult to prevent and to defeat, and the ability of an external power to influence the process is relatively small. In the past, however, the U.S. has helped to defeat or head off coups in Ethiopia, Venezuela, and elsewhere. The most important anti-coup measures are those which the local government must take: to moderate but sustain the pace of economic development; to keep its military happy with money, promotions, and weapons; to divide its military establishment into two or more competing institutions; to limit corruption and to distribute its fruits broadly; and to develop channels for legitimate participation in politics by those elements of the population mobilized through modernization. In addition, the United States could conceivably help to deter and to defeat coups by making it quietly known that it had specially trained military forces that could quickly and decisively (within a matter of hours) come to the aid of a friendly regime threatened by military revolt.

The most probable future circumstances under which it might be desirable and necessary for the United States to intervene with military forces in third world conflicts thus differ from the principal instances in which it has intervened in the past. They tend to be located at either end of the spectrum of violence, with the principal challenges to be met by either counterintervention against Soviet/proxy military forces, on the one hand, or countercoup interventions, on the other.