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WHAT *ARE* THE LESSONS OF VIETNAM?

When the helicopter rose in flight from the roof of the doomed U.S. embassy in Saigon a decade ago, Americans hoped they had finally left Vietnam behind them. For years afterward there was a widespread effort in the United States to put the Indochina experience out of mind. In the late 1970s, Mike Mansfield, the professor of Far Eastern studies who became U.S. Senate majority leader and then ambassador to Japan, told an English radio audience:

> It seems to me the American people want to forget Vietnam and not even remember that it happened. But the cost was 55,000 dead, 303,000 wounded, $150 billion. With some of us it will never be forgotten because it was one of the most tragic, if not *the* most tragic, episodes in American history. It was unnecessary, uncalled for, it wasn't tied to our security or a vital interest. It was just a misadventure in a part of the world which we should have kept our nose out of.[1]

Today the desire to forget Vietnam seems to have given way to a desire to learn about it—specifically to learn how to avoid getting involved in such disastrous misadventures again. The last decade has witnessed not merely a resurgence of interest in America's Indochina experience as such but also in the possible parallels that can be drawn to it in Central America, the Middle East and elsewhere. Increasingly one hears appeals to the lessons of Indochina—generally if inaccurately referred to as the lessons of Vietnam—in support of or in opposition to current foreign policy initiatives around the world. Thus, Sen-

[1] Quoted in Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1978, p. 67.

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ator Gary Hart, when he charged in the 1984 presidential primary campaign that former Vice President Mondale misunderstood the crisis in Central America, claimed that "At the heart of the difference is, perhaps, the lesson of Vietnam . . . Mr. Mondale . . . has not learned the lesson of Vietnam." In reply, Mondale said that "Hart has learned the wrong lesson from Vietnam."

There are certain undisputed practical lessons that can be drawn from the long history of American involvement in Indochina's affairs, but most of these are of an operational character—those relating to the techniques and technologies of warfare—and as such lie outside the realm of this article. We propose to direct our attention solely to the question of whether or not the Indochina experience can provide lessons about where and in what circumstances America ought to intervene militarily in foreign conflicts.

Can one draw lessons—in this broad policy sense—from history? Some professional historians say no, and even those who say yes caution that it must be done with the utmost care. Politicians often misuse historical analogies; policymakers frequently misinterpret history and see parallels to current situations in past situations that were fundamentally different. Yet history often does offer guidance: thus, British delegates to the Versailles Conference in 1919 profited from a study prepared for them of the peace negotiations at the Congress of Vienna a century earlier.

It also serves as a warning, for history affords insights neglected at one's peril. American isolationists in the 1920s and 1930s failed to perceive that the historical circumstance that had made American isolation possible—the invincibility of the British navies guarding our ocean frontiers—had come to an end in 1916–17 during the German submarine campaign. Had members of the isolationist America First Committee understood why this country could not stay out of the First World War, they would have understood why it should not and would not stay out of the second.

The future is unpredictable, and even history is uncertain and subject to revision by successive generations of historians. Yet to the extent that we now agree as to what should have been done at junctures in the past—as we are in general agreement that England and France ought not to have appeased Hitler at Munich, that the lesson of Munich is the need to oppose totalitarian dictators—history provides us with a

common point of departure for public discourse about policy issues facing us today. It gives us an area of agreement about the past from which to build toward agreement about the present and future.

The underlying condition for using historical episodes as a unifying metaphor enabling us to better understand new situations is that a consensus about the past must exist. Otherwise, illuminating though the past may be for each individual in arriving at a private understanding of events, it does not help in persuading others so as to arrive at a common understanding.

There is no question about what the central lesson of Munich is, only about whether or not it applies in a given situation. With increasing frequency we are told what Vietnam ought to have taught us about ourselves, about our allies and adversaries, and about the proper means and ends of American foreign policy. The assumption seems to be that Americans share a common understanding of what happened in Indochina and what we ought or ought not to have done there. But is that assumption true?

II

A difficulty that arises at the very outset is that the answers depend on what actually happened, but accounts differ on just that. Did the American government really know, for example, what it was doing in Indochina? Did it have the knowledge and the accurate information that was needed in order to make the right decisions?

In 1983, the knowledgeable George E. Reedy, once press secretary to President Lyndon Johnson, blamed the ignorance of Americans, from the President on down, for the errors that were committed in Indochina. In 1983 too, Senator Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) drew a parallel between Indochina and Central America: "The painful truth is that many of our highest officials know as little about Central America in 1983 as we knew about Indochina in 1963." The lesson is that both government officials and private citizens should in future be better informed about world affairs. Good advice; a worthy New Year's resolution. But are we likely to carry it into effect? How many of us at this moment are studying the situation in Baluchistan or some other likely flashpoint of crisis?

In any event it is by no means universally conceded that we did not know what we were doing. Barbara Tuchman is among

those who do not agree that we lacked the knowledge to make the right decisions in Indochina. In her much-discussed recent book, *The March of Folly*, she claims that "ignorance was not a factor in the American endeavor in Vietnam." Instead, she concludes that American policy in that country was a principal illustration of governmental folly. By folly, Mrs. Tuchman means irrationality: the pursuit of policies that run contrary to self-interest by people who knew they were doing so. She writes that in Vietnam, "All the conditions and reasons precluding a successful outcome were recognized or foreseen" by American officials who willfully refused to draw conclusions or to act upon the basis of what they knew.

Support for her premise that American officials were well-informed of the realities of Vietnam is offered by Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts in their 1979 book, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*. They assert that, throughout the various administrations involved in the Vietnam conflict, "virtually all views and recommendations were considered and virtually all important decisions were made without illusions about the odds for success." *The Pentagon Papers* confirm that on the whole the American intelligence community supplied the government with accurate information, and that the Joint Chiefs of Staff took a more realistic view of American prospects than did the National Security Council and other civilian bodies. The lesson here would seem to be that the CIA and the Joint Chiefs should have a greater role in decision-making in the future, and civilian politicians less, but that is hardly an attractive idea for a democracy.

For Barbara Tuchman, then, the lesson of Vietnam is that in the future the American electorate ought to choose candidates for high office who have more courage and character. More good advice, but experience suggests that we are unlikely to follow it. It may be more than coincidence that the senators who had the courage to oppose the Vietnam War when it was still unpopular to do so—Wayne Morse, Ernest Gruening, George McGovern, Frank Church and, later, J. William Fulbright—were defeated for reelection, and none of them was elected to public office again. To be fair to Mrs. Tuchman, it should be said that the tone of her book suggests that she does not seriously expect the American electorate to heed her sermon.

Closely related to the dispute over whether ignorance was a key factor—either in general or at one particular level of

government—is the argument over *how* America got involved so deeply in Vietnam. Some see it as having been a gradual process in which the U.S. government ended up somewhere it did not intend to go to when it began the process. Thus Representative Henry Gonzalez (D-Tex.), in the course of the congressional debate on El Salvador in March 1983, remarked that, "Those of us who remember the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution know just how big a seemingly innocuous commitment can become." Using the same illustration, during the War Powers debate in September of the same year, Congressman Gene Snyder (D-Ky.) claimed that it was no use trying to limit a grant of power to the President. "Obviously, even after he had the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in his pocket, it was not the President's *intention* to use it to expand the American presence in Vietnam." That is why, said Mr. Snyder, it was unwise to grant powers to President Reagan in the Middle East while trying to impose limits on them. "I contend that these limitations and restrictions are nothing more than good intentions—like the ones we heard from the administration in 1964—and we must recognize that a war in the Mideast can be just as hard on good intentions as a war in Southeast Asia was." The solution he urged was to refuse the President even the limited powers for which he asked in the Middle East.

Representative Gonzalez is clearly right in observing that small commitments can develop into large ones without anyone intending for them to do so. But is the Congress then going to stop entering into commitments altogether? Clearly it cannot. And those like Representative Snyder who believe the lesson of Vietnam to be that the President must be strictly limited in his power to intervene with armed forces abroad may have achieved less than they had hoped by passing the War Powers Act. Since that time, President Reagan has surely gone much further in involving the United States in, for example, Central America than an apprehensive Congress may have desired; the act seems not to have had all that much effect. There is, therefore, a real question as to whether such legislation can—as it is intended to do—prevent new Vietnams.

But was it really the case that the Vietnam involvement was unintentional, that the chief executive was carried along by the momentum of his own actions? Certainly there is persuasive testimony to support the theory that such is what happened. Theodore Sorenson, special counsel to President John F. Kennedy, wrote to *The New York Times* in August 1983 (in the

context of the debate over El Salvador) that, "As J.F.K. learned in Vietnam, each incremental increase in American military advisers and assistance, every escalation about 'dominoes' or 'national interest,' makes it harder for us to reverse course." Harder, presumably, because the political costs of doing so may be higher than an administration is willing to pay.

There are those, however, who believe that is not what happened at all. Frances Fitzgerald, war correspondent and author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning book about the Vietnam War, believes that several successive governments of the United States intentionally and deliberately injected America into the Indochina conflict; and that far from being drawn into it, our government had to work hard to succeed in getting itself involved. Speaking to a conference on Vietnam in 1983, she said that "Vietnam was not a quagmire, in the sense that we stumbled into it and were sucked down and unable to get out despite our own efforts; though this is the textbook, and I think probably the cinematic, version of the war. In fact, the United States created the war."[2]

Certainly with respect to the 1950s, there is much evidence to indicate that under the guidance of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles the United States deliberately involved itself in the Indochina situation. What precautionary lesson follows then, or should follow, in order to prevent a future American administration from following a similar course? Apparently none; Frances Fitzgerald told her audience that if the current Administration attempted a new adventure of the Vietnam sort, "there's very little I or perhaps anyone else can do about it."

In the Vietnam matter, Daniel Ellsberg clearly was someone who believed there was something he could do about it. Ellsberg, who passed the secret *Pentagon Papers* to the Congress and the press, said that he did so because he had lost faith in the executive branch of the government.[3] A succession of American presidents over the course of 20 years, Ellsberg said, had been supplied with information and nonetheless had chosen to disregard it. Thus it was not the government as a whole that was to blame, but one branch of it.

For Daniel Ellsberg and those who share his views, the lesson

[2] Quoted in Harrison F. Salisbury (ed.), *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, New York: Harper & Row, 1984, p. 52.

[3] Charlton and Moncrieff, p. 178.

of Indochina is that when the executive branch of the government pursues a dangerous course of action, it can and should be halted by arousing the other branches of the government and the public; and this can be done effectively through the news media. But here again one runs up against an irreconcilable conflict over the facts: according to many of those directly in charge of prosecuting the war, it was the executive branch that was pursuing the right course of action, which the news media caused to miscarry.

By such actions as publishing the *Pentagon Papers*, the news media clearly did play a role in countering the policy of the executive branch of the government in the 1970s. Indeed, many supporters of the American involvement in Indochina blame the media for stopping the war just at the point, they claim, when America had got it won. General William Westmoreland, the commander of the troops there, is only one of those who claim that the war was won militarily, but was lost because the United States no longer was willing to stay the course. As a witness in Westmoreland's law suit against CBS, Lieutenant-General Daniel O. Graham, who directed the intelligence arm of the Joint Chiefs of Staff a decade ago, told the jury that in 1968 the enemy in Vietnam was "whipped"—and that the United States lost the war later only because of political decisions and the press. Public opinion polls show that a majority of the American public also believes that the war could have been won if we had had the willpower to continue with it.

General Westmoreland and his colleagues may be right when they say they lost the war on America's television screens. But if so, what have we learned from the experience? So long as the American public is free to read the news in newspapers, hear the news on the radio and—above all—watch the news on television, can the U.S. armed forces ever wage and win a war again? Ronald Reagan apparently does not think so: during the U.S. intervention in Grenada, press coverage was limited to the point of nonexistence. But except perhaps in the case of a lightning operation such as that in Grenada, there is no way that a free society can accept such controls on its flow of information.

General Westmoreland and his colleagues may have overlooked a more fundamental problem they faced in trying to persuade the American people to persevere with the war in 1967–68. It concerns what General Graham meant when he said that the enemy was "whipped." Opponents of the war did

not believe that "whipping" the enemy was enough, so long as the enemy refused to submit or surrender. In their view, the American army in Vietnam in 1968 was in much the same position as Napoleon's army in Moscow in 1812: it had beaten the enemy in every battle, but knew no way to go forward to bring the war to an end. The news media brought home to the American people how little effective control over the population of Vietnam had been purchased by all of General Westmoreland's victories. The media cannot be blamed for pointing out the problem, and if General Westmoreland knew the answer to it, perhaps he should have revealed it to the public.

President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger did believe that they knew the answer to the problem during their terms in office. They continue to believe that they succeeded in negotiating a satisfactory end to the war. In their view, it was the legislative rather than the executive branch of the government that was to blame for the Indochina disaster. In this respect, the role of the Congress in the final collapse of the American endeavor in Southeast Asia has recently come under strong fire. In his 1983 *Wall Street Journal* article, Nixon wrote that, "Between 1973 and 1975, Congress cut the arms budget for South Vietnam by 76 percent. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, doubled its shipment of arms to North Vietnam. It is not surprising that in 1975 the North Vietnamese . . . rolled into Saigon." Ellsworth Bunker, who was U.S. ambassador to Saigon then, said much the same thing a year later in an interview with *The New York Times*: by the end of 1972, "we had achieved our objective, made it possible for the South Vietnamese to defend themselves." But, when "Congress decided not to put up any more money," South Vietnam's defeat became "inevitable." And President Reagan has left little doubt as to what lesson he draws from this: "In this 'post-Vietnam' era, Congress hasn't yet developed capacities for coherent, responsible action needed to carry out the new foreign policy powers it has taken for itself."

It is, however, very much the president's job not merely to rally but also to sustain the Congress and the people behind his policies—and not to engage the United States in a war unless he can do so. If the Congress and the nation fail to back him, it might be his fault, not theirs.

Recently Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger took this observation—that the president cannot successfully pursue a war through to final victory if the Congress and the people

oppose his policy—as a point of departure in outlining the lessons we should apply in the future. In a speech on November 28, 1984, he listed "six major tests to be applied when we are weighing the use of U.S. combat forces abroad." Elements to be identified by these tests were: vital to our national interest, "the clear intention of winning," well-defined political and military interests, a continual willingness to reassess the "size, composition and disposition" of the forces involved, the recognition that the use of U.S. troops was a "last resort"—and then a point that hearkened back specifically to the Vietnam experience:

> Before the U.S. commits combat forces abroad, there must be some reasonable assurance we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress. We cannot fight a battle with the Congress at home while asking our troops to win a war overseas or, as in the case of Vietnam, in effect asking our troops not to win but just to be there.

In a speech delivered 11 days later Secretary of State George Shultz made the evident rejoinder: "There is no such thing as guaranteed public support in advance." As pictured by Secretary Shultz, the role of the administration is to lead rather than to follow the country. The burden of statesmanship, as he termed it, was the President's responsibility for deciding when and where to use American troops abroad.

It appears, then, that whether one blames the executive for the failure in Indochina, or whether, like President Nixon, one blames the legislature, the only lesson that emerges is that the president or the Congress, or perhaps both, should use better judgment next time. That certainly is true, but as a guideline it is no help at all.

III

Where did the U.S. government go wrong? In sending American troops to fight in a foreign war, did it support the wrong government? Did it understand who our allies and adversaries really were?

At the outset, one again encounters the disagreement about whether President Nixon and Secretary Kissinger succeeded in negotiating a satisfactory solution to the Indochina conflict. On the conviction they had done so, Mr. Nixon recently wrote that, "As U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick points out, the

most generous excuse for those who cut aid to South Vietnam . . . was that they didn't know what would happen. But now there can be no excuses."

His reference was to Ambassador Kirkpatrick's statement that the lesson we learned in Indochina—and that will keep us from making the same mistake again—concerns the nature of the enemy. In May 1983 she wrote that, "we didn't know who the Viet Cong were," but we "know now." She went on to state that, "Western public opinion was manipulated into believing that the National Liberation Front . . . was a spontaneous product of 'deeper social causes'," but that we now know that the Viet Cong were sent into the South by North Vietnam, and that the regimes they have established in Indochina are brutal, savage dictatorships. "The crucial difference between Vietnam and Central America," she wrote, "is that the Congress that cut off aid to Vietnam could say that it did not guess what would follow."[4]

Insofar as Mr. Nixon and Ambassador Kirkpatrick are distinguishing the moral difference between the Indochina regimes the United States backed and those backed by our adversaries, they are undoubtedly correct. This was particularly true in Kampuchea; corrupt and ineffective though the Lon Nol regime we supported may have been, it was angelic by comparison with the genocidal Pol Pot regime that replaced it. But the point with which Mr. Nixon and Mrs. Kirkpatrick fail to come to grips is that we are faced with not only a moral issue but also a practical one. Much as we might like to do so, it is not always feasible for us to prevent evil regimes from taking power. Nor is it always in our power to dictate what regimes foreign countries will adopt. Many longtime opponents of the war have always considered the communist enemy to be brutal and totalitarian, but continue to believe that it was not in the interest of the United States to send an army to Asia to fight it, since Vietnam itself was of only marginal strategic importance to this country. Such opponents of the war consider many regimes in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe—including those of the Soviet Union and its satellite, Poland—to be brutal and totalitarian, and in some cases bloodthirsty, yet do not propose to send American armies to all of those places to put the world to rights.

From a very different perspective, former Secretary of State

[4] *The Washington Post*, April 17, 1983, p. D8.

Alexander Haig, like Mrs. Kirkpatrick and Mr. Nixon, takes the view that our undoing in Vietnam was in misunderstanding the nature of the enemy. The primary adversary, he believes, was Moscow, and that is where we should have gone from the very start. "If in the beginning we had been willing to go to the Soviet Union and demand an end to the aggression of Hanoi, and if Moscow had believed in our determination, there might very well have been no war," he writes in *Caveat*, his memoirs.

Yet President Lyndon Johnson, one of the most persuasive arm-twisters in the history of American politics, tried—and failed—to persuade the Soviet leaders to call off the war. Granted, this was not at the very beginning of the conflict; but there is strong evidence tending to show that Moscow did not restrain Hanoi because it could not. Early in 1965, for example, Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin tried to persuade the North Vietnamese leaders to explore a compromise solution—but was unable to do so.

Certainly the Nixon Administration, in which Haig served, consistently put pressure on the U.S.S.R. to use its presumed influence with the North Vietnamese to coerce the latter into accepting a negotiated settlement. This was especially true in the crucial year of 1972, as Henry Kissinger relates in his own memoirs. When North Vietnam launched a series of powerful assaults in early April, Kissinger responded "by moving in the direction Nixon favored, to the extent of holding Moscow responsible for Hanoi's offensive." For months thereafter, Kissinger and Nixon played an elaborate game of linkage, sometimes condemning Moscow, sometimes coaxing, and sometimes saying that the military actions of the North jeopardized "the larger interests," that is, détente, a summit and an arms control agreement. Again, there is little evidence to suggest that the Russians either took these statements lightly or failed to apply what pressure they could on Hanoi—while there is much to suggest that the North Vietnamese simply would not be pressured.

A very different picture—the mirror opposite of what General Haig and his former superiors imagine the nature of the enemy to have been—emerges from a reading of the *Pentagon Papers*. In this picture, the Viet Cong forces were an independent entity until 1959, when North Vietnamese forces infiltrated the South with the objective of bringing the Viet Cong under their control. Thereafter North Vietnam made the decisions,

and played off its Russian and Chinese sponsors against one another so as to retain its independence. As rivals for leadership of world communism, neither the Soviet Union nor China could afford to appear less ardent than the other in supporting Hanoi. Had Moscow and Beijing been able to act in unison, they might have been able to force Hanoi to do their bidding; but since Hanoi had gained freedom of action by playing off one against the other, it was Hanoi alone that was free to stop the fighting. General Haig said we were wrong not to go to Moscow for a decision; it now appears that perhaps we were wrong not to go directly to Hanoi.

For many Americans on both sides of the political fence, however, the cardinal mistake made by the United States concerned not our assessment of our enemies, but of our allies, and specifically the nature of the various Indochinese regimes that the Congress and the American people were asked to support throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. One set of such criticisms is based on the belief that—in Saigon and elsewhere—our government locked us into opposition to the forces of change and thus allowed those forces to be captured by communism. Comparing Indochina to Central America, Robert E. White, a former ambassador to El Salvador, told a conference on Vietnam in 1983: "The basic lesson we should have learned in Vietnam" is not to "put our policy in pawn to a hard-line military that cannot afford to compromise."[5] Mr. White warned of the danger of distorting Third World realities by viewing them in an East-West context. He was sure that the forces the United States opposed in Central America were authentically and indigenously revolutionary, while the forces we supported no longer represented the region's realities—if indeed they ever did.

General Westmoreland, on the other hand, believes that the government we initially supported in Vietnam was authentically indigenous. In his opinion we were right to support it and wrong to turn against it. In the General's words, "Our country made a grievous mistake . . . in getting involved, not only in encouraging the South Vietnamese to overthrow Diem, but participating in that effort. And I think morally that pretty well locked us into Vietnam, because there was no leadership standing in the wing to take over."[6] Thus the war was Ameri-

[5] Salisbury, p. 309.
[6] Charlton and Moncrieff, p. 135.

canized, and the Saigon government lost its indigenous roots and appeal.

Yet the late Henry Cabot Lodge, then the United States ambassador to South Vietnam, advised Washington that the war could not be won if Diem and his family remained in power. The debate still continues as to whether or not Lodge was right; but if he was, we were at least as likely to be defeated with Diem as without him. Yet it was not only the Diem government that many U.S. critics believed was impossible to sustain. Those that followed—particularly the governments of Generals Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu—also drew condemnation from American critics of the war for being corrupt, inefficient and incompetent.

This is a controversy that was renewed in the context of Central America when Representative Clarence D. Long (D-Md.), then chairman of the relevant congressional committee, attacked appropriations for current El Salvador policy in early 1983. He did so by appealing to the experience of Indochina. He said, "The similarity of Vietnam is so close it is almost uncanny. There is the unwillingness of people to fight, incompetent, corrupt leadership, and calling everyone a Communist." Two months later, supporting the very policy Mr. Long had attacked, former President Nixon wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* that, "There are chilling parallels between what is happening in El Salvador and what happened in Vietnam." One of the parallels, he wrote, was that misguided congressional critics were trying to cut off aid on the grounds that "the government is corrupt, repressive and inefficient."

Many of us would agree with Mr. Nixon that the regimes America supported in Indochina were less bad than the regimes America opposed; as a moral matter we were right to choose the lesser of two evils. But there is a practical side to the issue too, and it can be expressed simply by saying that we want to win. What was wrong in backing a weak, corrupt, inefficient regime against a brutally powerful, fanatically puritanical, ruthlessly efficient adversary was that our side was likely to lose.

It is fundamental that when we intervene abroad we should do so on behalf of a cause powerful enough so that we stand a chance of winning. If we are among those who believe that *none* of the Saigon regimes were either strong or popular enough to stand alone without massive U.S. assistance, then the only lesson would seem to be that there are regions of the world in which local communist forces cannot be countered or

contained. But if one believes it is vital to American interests to prevent such areas from succumbing to communism, then one emerges, not with a lesson, but with an apparently hopeless dilemma.

An attractive theory that points a way out of this dilemma emerges if we redefine the problem that faced us in Indochina. In 1961 John Kenneth Galbraith, then ambassador to India, advised President Kennedy against becoming involved in Vietnam militarily but suggested that if we restricted our efforts to economic and social programs we could still strengthen the Diem government. A similar point was made in the context of Central America by Senator Gary Hart when he declared in a campaign speech that "the commitment of U.S. military force to Central America cannot be the answer to the problems in Central America, as it was not the answer in Vietnam."

The perception that military victory in Indochina was an illusory goal to pursue recurs frequently in the comments of participants and observers. They appear to overlook the need for a considerable period of time to elapse before an economic and social program can bear fruit. It can take years—even decades; in Vietnam in the 1960s, there simply was not that much time available. Once the threat became immediate and military, it is hard to see how that threat could have been blunted by other than military means.

If the threat in Vietnam was, in fact, posed by the North Vietnamese army and its Viet Cong ally, then how could economic and social aid to South Vietnam have averted that threat? Senator Hart did not claim that it would have done so. His point was that, in Central America as in Vietnam, the threat "is not Communism, but poverty." Central America aside, why was poverty in Vietnam a threat to the national security interests of the United States? World poverty in general poses a long-term threat to our interests as well as a constant challenge to our conscience, but how did the poverty of Indochina in particular, and only during the late 1950s and the 1960s, threaten America?

At the time, Indochina was of interest to American leaders only as a battlefield on which to defeat communist aggression. This may have been a mistaken objective, but if it *was* the objective, then the poverty of South Vietnam becomes germane only if it contributed significantly to the conquest of that country by North Vietnam. It then becomes relevant to point out that North Vietnam was poor too, but won the war none-

theless. The vast amounts of money brought into South Vietnam by the American armed forces seem if anything to have demoralized the country, and to have destroyed the equilibrium of its society rather than to have strengthened it.

Far from ignoring the economic aspect of the conflict in Indochina, President Lyndon Johnson strongly believed that it provided the key to its resolution. In his vision, outlined in a speech at Johns Hopkins University in April of 1965, a Mekong River development plan, modeled on the Tennessee Valley Authority and made possible by his pledge of a billion dollars, would bring prosperity to all of Southeast Asia. This was his inducement to the other side to enter into a compromise peace, but it was not accepted. It was not relevant to the real goals and motivations of the North Vietnamese leaders who, far from giving priority to the quest for prosperity, were prepared to suffer and to impose suffering on their people in order to attain their objectives.

The value of Senator Hart's remarks about the inappropriateness of military means may lie in their negative aspect. In situations like Vietnam, it may be that we ought not to intervene militarily, not because economic and social intervention would prove more effective, but because nothing—short of unrestricted warfare—would work. If, despite all the aid the United States gives, our local ally cannot cope on its own with the local communists, then ours may be a lost cause in that country. In this connection, it is noteworthy that (excluding Afghanistan, which is on the Russian border) the Soviet Union has succeeded in expanding the ambit of its influence without sending its own armies into the Third World to do the fighting for its local allies.

Yet even this precept of policy founders on the example of Korea, where American military intervention did succeed in preserving the independence of South Korea. General Matthew B. Ridgeway, supreme commander of the U.N. forces in Korea and a long-time opponent of American involvement in Vietnam, used to point out that one salient difference was that in South Korea we were defending a government that was rooted in a strong political base in the country and that in South Vietnam we were not. Military means can accomplish only military ends; and while the armed forces of the United States can help to defend a politically healthy ally against an enemy military attack, they cannot supply that ally with political health, should it be lacking. But what about the tiny island of

Grenada? American policy seems to have succeeded there despite the absence of a local leader whom we could support at the time of our invasion.

If close examination of both our adversaries and our local allies provides us with no useful lesson of the Indochina experience, then we are left only with the question of why we intervened in Vietnam in the first place. Indeed, the questions of why and how—of ends and means—continue to be among the most divisive issues to emerge from the war. As we have seen, there are those who believe the Indochina war in fact was won or could have been won had we persevered or had we fought the war in some other way; there are those who believe that non-military means should have been used; finally, there are those who believe that the cause was hopeless from the outset or became hopeless somewhere along the way. Surprisingly—for it is some three decades since Secretary of State Dulles moved America into France's vacated place in Indochina—there is still fierce disagreement as to why the United States felt compelled to establish a presence there at all.

IV

Why then did we intervene in Indochina?

For no evident reason, according to many. Roughly a decade ago a poll was taken of U.S. army generals that showed 70 percent of them believed that it was not clear what America had hoped to achieve in the Indochina war. The lesson, according to 91 percent of them, was that if the United States ever were to fight such a war again, it should begin by deciding what it wanted to accomplish. In fact, the United States did pursue defined objectives in Indochina; the trouble was that it kept changing its mind as to what they were. From first to last there was consistent agreement only about what our objective was not: we were not fighting to make South Vietnam into an American colony. Unfortunately, that is exactly what a great many people thought that we were doing.

John Foster Dulles was a strong opponent of British and French colonialism, which he viewed with considerable contempt, but he initiated an American policy in Indochina that was widely viewed as colonialist too. Indeed, some opponents of American policy believe that colonialism was the fatal flaw in that policy. Their view is that the Saigon regime could not draw upon ardor and devotion even from its own troops and supporters—so as to match the other side's—because the peo-

ple of Vietnam believed the rulers of Saigon were America's representatives rather than their own.

By the middle of the 1960s, it began to appear to leaders of the Johnson Administration that we were fighting a war to impose a regime that even we found unsatisfactory upon a country of no clear importance to us. It then began to appear less evident why we were doing so.

On May 19, 1967, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara drafted a memorandum redefining the goals worth fighting for in Vietnam. Since in his expressed view the goal of containing Chinese expansionism already had been attained, he no longer believed it vital that South Vietnam should remain independent or that it should remain non-communist. The only American goal left, he claimed, was to stop the application of force by North Vietnam such that "the people of the South" were denied "the ability to determine their own future." He admitted that "the line is hard to draw" as to the form and extent of North Vietnamese influence that we should deem acceptable. But surely in the conditions of 1967 in Vietnam it was illusory to believe that the great mass of the long-suffering illiterate peasantry, with no traditions of democracy, could express a free choice or would be allowed by their own government or any other to do so. It is difficult to read Secretary McNamara's memorandum without coming to believe that he thought there was no longer any compelling reason to go on fighting; at the end of 1984, breaking his long silence about Indochina policy, he confirmed that this was so.

When Clark Clifford replaced Mr. McNamara as secretary of defense, one of the questions he supposedly forced his associates to face was what purpose would be served by sending the reinforcements General Westmoreland requested in the wake of the Tet offensive. At that time—in the late winter of 1968—General Westmoreland still sought military victory; that, as Clark Clifford saw it, would result in an American-occupied Vietnam, something that we did not desire. What, then, *did* we desire? What vital national interest were we fighting in Vietnam to protect?

James Thomson, who served in the crucial years 1964–65 as an aide to the assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs and as a staff member of the National Security Council, claims that while government officials frequently asserted that the preservation of Southeast Asia was a vital American national

interest, they never thought matters through to examine whether and why that assertion was true.[7]

Is it the case that we should intervene abroad militarily only in areas vital to our national interests? Arguably, but not necessarily; Indochina does not prove the case one way or another. It does not shed any light on the question of whether or not to intervene in situations the United States can dominate easily—in Grenada, to take an obvious example, or, in 1965, in the Dominican Republic. Vietnam only raised the question of whether the American people are prepared to take on a major fight—to undergo suffering, sacrifices and casualties—if vital national interests are not at stake. And that question was raised because leading architects of America's Vietnam policy believed that we should intervene even if *national* interests were not at stake.

Indeed, the American decision to intervene in Indochina was predicated on the view that the United States has a duty to look beyond its purely national interests. In this view, the United States has assumed global responsibilities that require it to serve the interests of mankind. That vision of America's destiny was particularly manifest during the Kennedy Administration, when British and other foreign observers remarked with admiration that while in London, Paris and other capital cities, officials concerned themselves only with the parochial interests of their own countries, in Washington statesmen addressed the needs and aspirations of the human race. The decision to intervene against perceived communist aggression in Indochina was made in Washington in the name of the whole non-communist world's need for international security and world order.

The concept of international relations upon which that decision was based derived from the failure of the League of Nations—decades before—to carry into practice its theory of collective security against aggression. By the tenets of that theory, an aggressor would back down in the face of a league united against it, and a potential aggressor would be deterred from invading its neighbor by the certainty that such a league would confront it. In the 1930s the members of the League failed to stand together in the face of one aggressive challenge after another from Mussolini and Hitler. Countries allowed themselves to be picked off one at a time. The lesson of the

[7] Salisbury, p. 15.

1930s, which political leaders carried with them into office in the 1950s and 1960s, was that the democracies ought to make a united stand against totalitarian aggression wherever and whenever it might occur.

As former Secretary of State Dean Rusk remarked in a recent interview, "I was part of a generation that had been given heavy responsibility during and after World War II. During the 1930s we had been led down the path to a war that could have been prevented. We came out of World War II thinking that the key to preventing World War III was collective security."[8]

A parallel lesson of Munich was that certain political regimes—Nazi Germany being the prime example—are so constituted that it is a mistake to try to conciliate them. Their voracious appetite for conquest cannot be appeased; the more that is conceded to them, the more they are encouraged to demand.

This fit well with the theory of how to deal with Soviet conduct propounded by George Kennan, writing as "Mr. X," in his famous *Foreign Affairs* article which outlined the strategy of containment. William Bundy, deputy assistant and assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs (1961–64) and assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs (1964–69), said in an interview a few years ago that in the early 1960s, "the theory of containment was still the dominant way of thinking." He said that in Indochina "it was essentially what we were doing. We were seeking to prevent the Chinese version of communism from expanding into the area of East Asia."[9]

In its military version (which Ambassador Kennan often has disavowed) containment came to be a misapplication of the lesson of Munich—a lesson to which American leaders often appealed. In the 1930s, up to the time of Munich, Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy still were too weak to fight a war against the Allies; they were bluffing and would probably have backed down if their bluff had been called. But in the 1960s, the Soviet Union and China, though divided, were formidable powers. It was by no means certain that either would have backed down if confronted by an American expeditionary force, or that they would have been defeated if

[8] *The Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 1985, p. 1.
[9] Charlton and Moncrieff, p. 67.

opposed. There were no powerful allies at our side whose strength, united to ours, necessarily would have intimidated or overwhelmed our adversaries. In these circumstances, for the United States unilaterally to send its armies into combat against communist aggression whenever and wherever it occurs was not collective and did not provide security.

It was on just such grounds that Walter Lippmann, in his book *The Cold War*, originally attacked Kennan's theory of containment. Lippmann's thesis was that the United States should select, in the light of its own interests and capabilities, the regions of the world in which it would engage itself. It should not extend itself by trying to act everywhere, and it should not allow its adversaries to dictate the time and place of confrontation.

There are those who believe that the United States *did* select Vietnam as Lippmann would have wished—as a region in which our interests were vital or as a battlefield particularly favorable to our side. If so, then those in our government who selected Vietnam on this basis were considerably wide of the mark in their judgment. Most policymakers, however, did not see us as choosing Vietnam but saw Vietnam as choosing us—we were drawn in because of communist aggression.

While opponents of the Vietnam War often assume that its outcome proved to the public that Lippmann was right—when the heaviness of the price was brought home to the American people, they refused to go on paying it because they did not deem Indochina *vitally* important—that view is still contested. Senator Robert Kasten (R-Wisc.), stressing the analogy between El Salvador and Vietnam in the spring of 1983, said:

> The Vietnam analogy is certainly popular with opponents of the administration. 'No more Vietnams' is their battle cry. By this, they mean that the United States should remain inactive in the face of blatant acts of aggression by the Soviet Union or its Cuban and Nicaraguan surrogates. But what must be remembered is that in reality Vietnam represents a successful case of Soviet aggression and the imposition of a brutal tyranny over the people of Vietnam and Kampuchea. I agree that there should be 'no more Vietnams' and that the United States must do what is necessary to prevent a repetition of that horror.[10]

What Vietnam proved, in this view, is that the consequences of communist aggression are so terrible for the people who fall

[10] Congressional Record, 98th Congress, 1st session, April 27, 1983, p. H7587.

under communist rule as a result of it, that the United States always and everywhere must act to prevent blatant acts of aggression by the Soviet Union and its surrogates.

This view rests on the premise that we have a *moral* duty to act. The troubling aspect is that moral judgments are not always universally shared. They often are subjective matters of conscience. There are many who view it as immoral for one country, if unprovoked, to intervene in the affairs of another. There were many who judged America's Indochina war to be morally wrong. It is feasible for the United States to pursue a policy grounded in morality only if the moral issues in question are ones upon which Americans are agreed. The doctrine of global military containment—to the extent that it rests upon a moral duty—is vulnerable precisely because the moral values at issue are matters of dispute.

Closely allied with the theory of global containment is the so-called domino theory, according to which Southeast Asia was a region such that if one country fell to communism, the effect would be to knock down the countries around so that they would fall to communism too. C. L. Sulzberger of *The New York Times* employed a different metaphor and pictured America's Asian and Pacific allies as being caught in a giant nutcracker between Red China and radical Indonesia. Lyndon Johnson frequently told visitors to the White House that if we did not take our stand in Vietnam, one day we would have to make our stand in Hawaii. Opponents of the Vietnam War have assumed that this theory too—indeed, this theory above all—was fatally discredited by the results of the war. It is a decade since the war came to an end, and communist landing craft still have not been sighted off Honolulu.

Some of those most involved in sending American troops to Vietnam, however, argue that this is precisely because America won its anti-domino, anti-nutcracker victory two decades ago. Up until 1965, leaders of the domino countries—Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand and even India—are said to have privately told the American government that it was vital for the United States to stay the course in Vietnam so as to save them from being crushed between China and Indonesia. In 1965–66 the arms of the nutcracker fell off: a new anti-communist government took power in Indonesia and destroyed the communist party in that country, while China withdrew from world affairs and concentrated her energies on the convulsions of the Cultural Revolution. In his 1967 mem-

orandum, Secretary of Defense McNamara stated that, "To the extent that our original intervention and our existing actions in Vietnam were motivated by the perceived need to draw the line against Chinese expansionism in Asia, our objective has already been attained." His successor, Clark Clifford, toured Asia and found that the domino leaders were no longer vitally concerned about Vietnam, and he asked, "Was it possible that we were continuing to be guided by judgments that might once have had validity but were now obsolete?"

More recently, McGeorge Bundy, national security adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, has summarized the history of these events by stating that, while Vietnam may have seemed "vital" until 1965, "at least from the time of the anti-Communist revolution in Indonesia, late in 1965, that adjective was excessive, and so also was our effort."[11] In this view, then, President Johnson's major military commitment to the Vietnam conflict was undertaken in the very year that it began to be unnecessary.

What, then, should the President have done? Having learned in 1966 that the enlarged war to which he had just committed the United States suddenly had become unnecessary, should he have recalled the American armies and brought them home? Would that not have inflicted a damaging blow to American prestige? Would it not have destroyed the world's belief in American reliability and steadiness? It is an axiom of statecraft that a great power trapped in a difficult or ultimately untenable position ought to persevere as long as possible in order to preserve the credibility of its other international commitments. That was the position adopted by the Johnson Administration and also by the incoming Nixon Administration in 1969.

Henry Kissinger writes in his memoirs,

> For nearly a generation the security and progress of free peoples had depended on confidence in America. We could not simply walk away from an enterprise involving two administrations, five allied countries, and thirty-one thousand dead as if we were switching a television channel. . . . As the leader of democratic alliances we had to remember that scores of countries and millions of people relied for their security on our willingness to stand by allies. . . . We could not revitalize the Atlantic Alliance. . . . We would not be able to move the Soviet Union toward the imperative of mutual restraint. . . . We might not achieve our opening to China. . . .

And, Mr. Kissinger added, we might not have succeeded in

[11] Salisbury, p. 52.

our Middle East diplomacy if world confidence in America's willingness to honor all of its international engagements were to be weakened or lost.

It is a strong case that Mr. Kissinger makes, but it is not a conclusive one. Was not confidence in American leadership deeply shaken by the spectacle of our persevering in the Vietnam War long after even the most pro-American foreigners agreed that the war was unpopular, unnecessary and unwinnable? Does it increase confidence in the intelligence of our strategists if, when we perceive a trap starting to close around us, we manfully refuse to withdraw from it? Were 31,000 deaths made more meaningful by incurring 27,000 more?

In reflecting upon recent events in Lebanon, President Johnson's undersecretary of state, George Ball, wrote in *The Washington Post* in the autumn of 1983:

> Our Vietnam experience also showed another reason for prudence: as a great power, we should avoid putting our troops in an untenable position, since we would then have to pay a political price to extricate them. Yet, as we learned to our sorrow in Vietnam, we should never let the prospect of that cost prevent us from closing out a hopeless situation. . . . Prestige, after all, is an elusive and evanescent abstraction that consists of many elements; other nations and peoples will respect us more if we demonstrate prudence, good sense and realism than if we appear abstract and foolhardy.

Looking back a decade later, the American defeat in Vietnam seems not to have destroyed the world's confidence in the willingness of the United States to honor international commitments. This may be *because* the Nixon Administration persevered in the war for five more years (as Henry Kissinger believes) or *despite* the fact that it did—which is what the authors of this article believe.

V

In every respect the Indochina war was a profound experience, not only for the men and women who fought there but for all of us who lived through it. It was also an intensely personal, subjective experience. Not only are there diverse political and historical visions of what happened, but there are also diverse moral conclusions that persist.

President Reagan may have been right when he said, at the dedication of the Vietnam War Memorial in 1982, that the nation should "debate the lessons at some other time." But his use of force to back up his own foreign policy initiatives—the

dispatch of marines to Lebanon, the widescale troop maneuvers in the Caribbean and Honduras, the invasion of Grenada, the sending of military advisers to the government of El Salvador—makes it all the more likely that the American people will not hold off from the debate. Indeed, if the foreign policy of the second Reagan Administration proves to be as assertive militarily as that of the first, the likelihood is that the debate over Vietnam will be renewed often and angrily in the years to come.

The passage of time has not helped, as yet, to resolve the debate over Vietnam. Richard Nixon still believes that the war was won, while seminars and symposia assemble to inquire why it was lost. In late 1984 Robert McNamara testified in a New York courtroom that he had disagreed with other Johnson Administration officials and with General Westmoreland about such basic questions as whether the war could be won. He indicated that in the intervening period neither he nor they had budged from their views. He did not believe that one could establish objectively which side was right. In describing his disagreement with his colleagues, he noted that "I say this without saying I was right and they were wrong."

The common theme running through most of the retrospective judgments about Indochina is the assumption that, once the lesson of Vietnam is pointed out, readers or listeners will see it for themselves. That basic assumption proves to be an illusion. The truth about Indochina is not self-evident; we all have our own views, but they are evident only to ourselves. The authors of this article also hold strong views about the Vietnam War, but no longer believe they can prove they are right to someone who holds contrary views. It is not because of any doubt as to the truth of the matter; it is for lack of objective evidence that cannot be controverted by the other side.

This leads to the conclusion that the Indochina experience is, at best, of limited use to the United States in building a contemporary consensus on the central issue—whether or not to intervene abroad with military force. The decision to send troops abroad is perhaps the most momentous decision a government can be called upon to make; whatever other value the Indochina experience may hold for us, it does not provide us with a point of departure for common discourse about how to face that challenge.

That robs us of something that could have been of great

value. The Munich Pact was a disaster, but at least the Western world recognized it as such and learned that it would be a mistake to commit the same error again. The lesson of Munich can be misapplied—but the point is that it can also be *applied*. The lesson of Vietnam, if there is one, cannot be applied because we still do not agree about what happened. Far from helping to clarify policy issues in Central America or the Middle East, appeals to the lessons of Vietnam merely compound a conflict about current policy with an argument about history. Reference to Vietnam, therefore, is at this point divisive rather than unifying.

The Indochina war was surely the most tragic episode in the history of the United States in this century. If we could all look at that terrible experience through the same pair of eyes, it could teach us much. But we cannot, so it cannot. That may be the final tragedy of the Vietnam war.

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