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ROBERT S. McNAMARA

In Retrospect

THE TRAGEDY AND
LESSONS OF VIETNAM

with Brian VanDeMark

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The Lessons of Vietnam

My involvement with Vietnam ended the day after I left the East Room. The war, of course, went on for another seven years. By the time the United States finally left South Vietnam in 1973, we had lost over 58,000 men and women; our economy had been damaged by years of heavy and improperly financed war spending; and the political unity of our society had been shattered, not to be restored for decades.

Were such high costs justified?

Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow, Lee Kwan Yew, and many other geopoliticians across the globe to this day answer yes. They conclude that without U.S. intervention in Vietnam, Communist hegemony—both Soviet and Chinese—would have spread farther through South and East Asia to include control of Indonesia, Thailand, and possibly India. Some would go further and say that the USSR would have been led to take greater risks to extend its influence elsewhere in the world, particularly in the Middle East, where it might well have sought control of the oil-producing nations. They might be correct, but I seriously question such judgments.

When the archives of the former Soviet Union, China, and Vietnam are opened to scholars, we will know more about those countries' intentions, but even without such knowledge we know that the danger of Communist aggression during the four decades of the Cold War was real and substantial. Although during the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s the West often misperceived, and therefore exaggerated, the power of the East and its ability to project that power, to have failed to defend ourselves against the threat would have been foolhardy and irresponsible.

That said, today I question whether either Soviet or Chinese behavior and influence in the 1970s and 1980s would have been materially different had the United States not entered the war in Indochina or had we withdrawn from Vietnam in the early or mid-1960s. By then it should have become apparent that the two conditions underlying President Kennedy's decision to send military advisers to South Vietnam were not being met and, indeed, could not be met: political stability did not exist and was unlikely ever to be achieved; and the South Vietnamese, even with our training assistance and logistical support, were incapable of defending themselves.

Given these facts—and they are facts—I believe we could and should have withdrawn from South Vietnam either in late 1963 amid the turmoil following Diem's assassination or in late 1964 or early 1965 in the face of increasing political and military weakness in South Vietnam. And, as the table opposite suggests, there were at least three other occasions when withdrawal could have been justified.

I do not believe that U.S. withdrawal at any of these junctures, if properly explained to the American people and to the world, would have led West Europeans to question our support for NATO and, through it, our guarantee of their security. Nor do I believe that Japan would have viewed our security treaties as any less credible. On the contrary, it is possible we would have improved our credibility by withdrawing from Vietnam and saving our strength for more defensible stands elsewhere.

DATE OF WITHDRAWAL	U.S. FORCE LEVELS IN SOUTH VIETNAM	US KILLED IN ACTION	BASIS FOR WITHDRAWAL
November 1963	16,300 advisers ^a	78	Collapse of Diem regime and lack of political stability
Late 1964 or early 1965	23,300 advisers	225	Clear indication of South Vietnam's inability to defend itself, even with U.S. training and logistical support
July 1965	81,400 troops	509	Further evidence of the above
December 1965	184,300 troops	1,594	Evidence that U.S. military tactics and training were inappropriate for the guerrilla war being waged
December 1967	485,600 troops	15,979	CIA reports indicating bombing in the North would not force North Vietnam to desist in the face of our inability to turn back enemy forces in South Vietnam
January 1973	543,400 troops (April 1969)	58,191 ^b	Signing of Paris Accords, marking an end of U.S. military involvement

^aThis and all subsequent figures in the table have been supplied by the U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.

^bAs of December 31, 1968, the number of U.S. killed-in-action in Vietnam totaled 30,568.

It is sometimes said that the post-Cold War world will be so different from the world of the past that the lessons of Vietnam will be inapplicable or of no relevance to the twenty-first century. I disagree. That said, if we are to learn from our experience in Vietnam, we must first pinpoint our failures. There were eleven major causes for our disaster in Vietnam:

1. We misjudged then—as we have since—the geopolitical intentions of our adversaries (in this case, North Vietnam and the Vietcong, supported by China and the Soviet Union), and we exaggerated the dangers to the United States of their actions.

2. We viewed the people and leaders of South Vietnam in terms of our own experience. We saw in them a thirst for—and a determination to fight for—freedom and democracy. We totally misjudged the political forces within the country.
3. We underestimated the power of nationalism to motivate a people (in this case, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong) to fight and die for their beliefs and values—and we continue to do so today in many parts of the world.
4. Our misjudgments of friend and foe alike reflected our profound ignorance of the history, culture, and politics of the people in the area, and the personalities and habits of their leaders. We might have made similar misjudgments regarding the Soviets during our frequent confrontations—over Berlin, Cuba, the Middle East, for example—had we not had the advice of Tommy Thompson, Chip Bohlen, and George Kennan. These senior diplomats had spent decades studying the Soviet Union, its people and its leaders, why they behaved as they did, and how they would react to our actions. Their advice proved invaluable in shaping our judgments and decision. No Southeast Asian counterparts existed for senior officials to consult when making decisions on Vietnam.
5. We failed then—as we have since—to recognize the limitations of modern, high-technology military equipment, forces, and doctrine in confronting unconventional, highly motivated people's movements. We failed as well to adapt our military tactics to the task of winning the hearts and minds of people from a totally different culture.
6. We failed to draw Congress and the American people into a full and frank discussion and debate of the pros and cons of a large-scale U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia before we initiated the action.
7. After the action got under way and unanticipated events forced us off our planned course, we failed to retain popular support in part because we did not explain fully what was happening and why we were doing what we did. We had not prepared the public to understand the complex events we faced and how to react constructively to the need for changes in course as the nation confronted uncharted seas and an alien environment. A nation's deepest strength lies not in its

- military prowess but, rather, in the unity of its people. We failed to maintain it.
8. We did not recognize that neither our people nor our leaders are omniscient. Where our own security is not directly at stake, our judgment of what is in another people's or country's best interest should be put to the test of open discussion in international forums. We do not have the God-given right to shape every nation in our own image or as we choose.
 9. We did not hold to the principle that U.S. military action—other than in response to direct threats to our own security—should be carried out only in conjunction with multinational forces supported fully (and not merely cosmetically) by the international community.
 10. We failed to recognize that in international affairs, as in other aspects of life, there may be problems for which there are no immediate solutions. For one whose life has been dedicated to the belief and practice of problem solving, this is particularly hard to admit. But, at times, we may have to live with an imperfect, untidy world.
 11. Underlying many of these errors lay our failure to organize the top echelons of the executive branch to deal effectively with the extraordinarily complex range of political and military issues, involving the great risks and costs—including, above all else, loss of life—associated with the application of military force under substantial constraints over a long period of time. Such organizational weakness would have been costly had this been the only task confronting the president and his advisers. It, of course, was not. It coexisted with the wide array of other domestic and international problems confronting us. We thus failed to analyze and debate our actions in Southeast Asia—our objectives, the risks and costs of alternative ways of dealing with them, and the necessity of changing course when failure was clear—with the intensity and thoroughness that characterized the debates of the Executive Committee during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

These were our major failures, in their essence. Though set forth separately, they are all in some way linked: failure in one area con-