

Viet Nam Conclusions

Five successive American Presidents and scores of senators and congressmen had insisted that the preservation of a small, isolated Southeast Asian nation was vital to U.S. national security. During a period of twenty-five years, these leaders first funded the war fought by the French and then supported and sponsored a policy under which the fighting in Vietnam was eventually assumed by the U.S. military to the point that it became, almost entirely, an American war.

America's involvement in Vietnam began, in 1950, as a political reaction to events elsewhere in Asia. While the communist victory in China in 1949 and the subsequent invasion of South Korea in 1950 had not directly threatened the United States, the political fallout from these events had tarnished President Harry Truman's presidency and elevated the importance of Southeast Asia to his administration. Siding with France in opposition to the "communist" Vietminh insurgency in Indochina was a proposition Truman could not afford to reject. Fighting communism in Indochina had been a tempting path out of the political jungle of recrimination and humiliation created by the foreign and domestic turmoil of the early days of the Cold War.

Thus Truman willingly, but out of apparent political necessity, made the first down payment on the tragedy that would become America's Vietnam War. Because he and his party had been painted soft on communism, especially communism in Asia, Democrats would never again to take lightly the communist threat in Asia. Because of Truman's painful experience, John E Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and even Republican Richard Nixon, each entered the White House acutely aware of the potential political consequences of insufficient vigilance against encroaching communism in the region.

But the down payment that Truman made in Indochina was not his alone. As a president labeled by his partisan and unyielding political opponents as a communist sympathizer, Truman could hardly be singularly condemned for seizing the opportunity for atonement in Asia. His decision to assist the French in what they persuaded American officials was a noble effort to resist Chinese communist aggression in Indochina may have been naive and misguided, but it was hardly a tragic and irreversible mistake. Besides providing Truman and the Democrats with some measure of political inoculation against further charges of appeasement, Truman's decision to assist the French was prompted by a very legitimate desire to strengthen France's ability to resist Soviet communism in its European backyard.

Perhaps Truman's greatest shortcoming in Indochina was his inability to devote adequate attention to the region in the crucial months after World War II. Had the new president and his State Department responded to Ho Chi Minh's entreaties in the war's aftermath, the charismatic Vietnamese leader might never have turned so completely to China for help with his war of national independence against the oppressive French colonialists. But in the period when State Department officials were debating whether to side with the legitimate nationalistic passions of many in Indochina, a preoccupied Truman was absent from the debate. Eventually, he blindly heeded the counsel of American officials far more sympathetic to the desires of French leaders. Ho was snubbed and a potential ally was lost to the Chinese.

Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles were no less committed to vigilance against communism in Asia (although Eisenhower approved an armistice agreement that accepted the communist government of North Korea). But where Truman and Acheson had stressed their successful containment policy against Soviet and Chinese communism, especially in Europe, Eisenhower and Dulles promised a far more ambitious and aggressive strategy for liberating the "captive peoples" under communist domination. In Indochina, at least, the Republican president

and his secretary of state never seemed to understand that the real captors in Indochina were the French colonialists who were determined to reestablish their former empire using American money, arms, and assistance. The foreign troops on Vietnamese soil were French.

That mattered little to Eisenhower and Dulles, who spoke boldly of liberating those enslaved by communism, but merely refined Truman's successful containment policy under the label of "New Look." What really occurred in Indochina during Eisenhower's tenure as president was a congressional-executive consensus on the need to assist the French in what was widely characterized as their valiant struggle against the Soviet-backed Chinese communist threat in Indochina. Persuaded by Eisenhower that preserving democracy in the region-if it ever really existed-was crucial to U.S. national security, members of Congress were more than willing to subsidize the lion's share of France's expenses. That was primarily because as long as France continued the fight, the United States could remain on the sidelines. That was good politics so soon after the end of the recent, unpopular war in Korea. Few, if any officials, ever bothered to explain the contradiction inherent in official pronouncements that while U.S. national security was at stake in Indochina, French troops, and not American soldiers, were expected to defend American interests.

When the French finally fled Indochina after the debacle at Dien Bien Phu, the United States assumed responsibility for financing and training the South Vietnamese. The real purpose of the American aid, however, was to build a bastion strong enough to withstand the communist tide that Eisenhower and Dulles believed threatened all of Southeast Asia. That endeavor, of course, required hundreds of millions of American dollars. But it also required the active support and willing participation of the leaders and citizens of South Vietnam-something that Eisenhower, Dulles, and almost everyone associated with the American-led enterprise recognized but were never able to obtain. American leaders, it seemed, always cared more about South Vietnam's "salvation" than the people they were saving.

Despite that major stumbling block, Eisenhower and Congress persisted. What kept the United States in Vietnam throughout the 1950s was the experience of just enough success-or, rather, the absence of abject failure to suggest that real reforms and military advances might someday be possible. But the optimism was always excessive, the faith in the power of old-fashioned Yankee know-how usually naive, and the knowledge of Vietnam's culture and history woefully inadequate. But even had American officials come to their senses, the story might not have changed much. Eisenhower and Dulles believed that to abandon Vietnam meant a communist victory in Saigon and a Democratic takeover in Washington. Politically, Eisenhower could not afford to abandon Vietnam any more than Truman could have afforded to ignore it.

Except for dissuading Eisenhower from a military operation he had already rejected at Dien Bien Phu, leading members of Congress were either quiescent or ignorant about U.S. policy toward Indochina during much of the 1950s. When they found the voice to find fault, it was usually to complain, as did Kennedy, about the French or, as did Mansfield, that American support for Ngo Dinh Diem was insufficient. Because the conflict seemed under control and Diem appeared to be the leader that South Vietnam needed, few leaders in Congress bothered to notice the increasing Vietminh strength, as well as Diem's troubling lack of enthusiasm for political and economic reforms that might have deprived the communist forces of the oxygen they needed to survive. In the process, few noticed that the so-called democratic government in South Vietnam was nothing of the sort.

By 1960, Eisenhower and Dulles had done little to improve the situation in South Vietnam. But the massive influx of American dollars and military equipment did buy Diem's regime time, meaning that John F. Kennedy inherited that nation's chronic problems when he

became president in 1961. Kennedy had the misfortune to become president at a time when Eisenhower's status quo policy in Indochina had run its course.

But Kennedy was no innocent bystander. Just as wedded to the domino theory in Southeast Asia as his predecessors, the new president regarded Vietnam as vital to U.S. security and believed the conflict was a proxy war in which the Soviets were testing the American will to resist communism. Following the debacle at the Bay of Pigs and his disastrous summit with Khrushchev in Vienna, Kennedy-like Truman before him found Indochina to be just the place to prove his commitment to the anticommunist struggle.

When the time came to decide whether to give up on Vietnam or pour in more American men and resources, it was Kennedy who willingly played the hand that Eisenhower and Dulles had dealt him. Those cards were being played less than twelve years after China had gone communist and Harry Truman was labeled a communist dupe for having "allowed" Mao Tse-tung's ascendancy. No matter how troubling and distasteful another Asian conflict might have been, Kennedy believed that he and his party could not withstand the political gales resulting from any decision that turned Diem into a Vietnamese Chiang kai-Shek. Kennedy's decision to send substantial numbers of military "advisors" was a monumental move that opened the door to the future escalation of the war during the Johnson years. Yet it was a decision made with too little thought about Vietnam's importance to U.S. national security and without a realistic assessment of the chances for success absent a democratic leader amenable to political and economic reforms. Furthermore, it was accomplished with little more than minor grumbling from compliant members of Congress who were still blissfully ignorant and uninformed about the stakes in Southeast Asia.

But it was Kennedy's fateful decision to put his administration on the side of the South Vietnamese military officers planning Diem's demise that virtually ensured that the Southeast Asian country would be enveloped in domestic strife, political corruption, and military lethargy for the remainder of the war. As bad as he was, Diem proved a more skillful leader than the parade of rouges, incompetents, and dictators who succeeded him. While historians will debate for years whether Kennedy, had he lived, would have escalated the war to the degree that Johnson did in 1965, it is clear that Kennedy, at the very least, left Johnson a Vietnam plagued by problems too daunting for any American army or nation-building enterprise. Even had he wanted to withdraw U.S. forces from Vietnam, Kennedy would have been unwilling prior to the 1964 elections, at least to invite the inevitable political firestorm from conservatives of both political parties.

Johnson, as a new president unsure of his political standing and facing an election in less than a year, would prove even more reticent to tamper with the Eisenhower-Kennedy policy in Vietnam. Advised by the very men Kennedy had hired and whose advice he had heeded, Johnson vowed to carry out Kennedy's policies, foreign and domestic. He had no interest in any fundamental reappraisal of the policy that had resulted in the murder of the popularly elected president of a nation the United States supported in its struggle against the Viet Cong. Even as he campaigned for election in his own right, pledging "no wider war," Congress eagerly gave him permission to widen the war as much as he liked. While the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution might not have given Johnson any powers he did not already possess, its near-unanimous passage ensured that he would never again feel the need to engage members of Congress in any meaningful or substantive consultation as he took the nation headlong into the "wider war" he had once decried.

Despite his mandate for reducing or maintaining the status quo in Vietnam, Johnson feared the political consequences of anything short of an outright victory over the Viet Cong and also how a full-scale American war might erode support and funding for his domestic initiatives. Although he considered other options, the graduated, sustained bombing of North Vietnam seemed the only viable option in early 1965 after the Viet Cong had demonstrated

alarming strength throughout South Vietnam beginning in the summer of 1964. But when the bombs failed to bring North Vietnam to the negotiating table, Johnson agonized before taking the fateful step of ordering massive numbers of ground troops. Like his predecessors, Johnson believed he was fighting against a Soviet-Chinese puppet regime in Hanoi. The degree to which the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies were primarily concerned with the independence and unification of their nation was ignored. Instead, Johnson stressed his belief in the Munich analogy and said repeatedly that the U.S. presence in South Vietnam was aimed at preventing World War III.

It often seemed, however, that Johnson's motives were more personal. Besides his obvious intense personal dislike of Ho, whom he never met, Johnson believed that any diminution of the U.S. effort in Vietnam would violate the SEATO treaty and the commitments of three presidents, bringing upon him embarrassment and discredit. To "tuck tail and run," Johnson believed, would mean that he, and by extension his country, would stand accused of cowardice and mendacity.

But Johnson never fully informed the American people about the war being fought in their name. To share the real nature of the escalation and its expected costs with members of Congress and their constituents would have jeopardized his beloved Great Society. In any event, Johnson knew that some in Congress would loudly oppose the escalation that he and his national security advisors had in mind. Therefore, a policy grounded in the deceptions of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents was now expanded by deceiving members of Congress, for political reasons, about its cost as well as its very nature and extent. But once the real extent and cost of the war became known, many of the most skeptical members of Congress were generally supportive of Johnson. The United States, after all, seemed to be fighting communism in Asia in support of the democratic government of South Vietnam in adherence with the nation's solemn obligations and in support of America's continued stature among the community of nations.

Wrapped thusly in the American flag by Johnson and his congressional supporters, the administration's policies enjoyed widespread support. The vast majority of members of Congress--despite having been deceived about the Gulf of Tonkin incidents--enthusiastically gave Johnson carte blanche to fight the war on his terms. More tragic, however, were those like Mansfield, Fulbright, Nelson, and McGovern who subjugated their serious doubts about Johnson's policies during an election year and gave him their support and then, in the ensuing months, gave him their silence.

Even among the most highly skeptical members of Congress-- McGovern, Church, and Mansfield--support for continued appropriations for Vietnam was strong. Indeed, support for "our boys in the field" would remain an article of faith in Congress for the remainder of the decade and would prove the most influential argument against withholding funds to force a troop withdrawal.

Withdrawal was never the only alternative to escalation. But calls for a negotiated settlement, which Johnson embraced rhetorically, were always spurned in practice. Johnson believed, and most certainly correctly, that any negotiated settlement would result in a communist-dominated South Vietnam. (Of course, after twenty-five years of war and millions of lost lives, including almost sixty thousand Americans, the result was no different.) But Johnson and his aides were transfixed on the evils of monolithic communism and the domino theory. They never entertained the idea, advanced by Fulbright and others, that the United States might have been able to peacefully coexist with a South Vietnamese communist regime that would have served as a buffer with Communist China, or at least one that would have been equally hostile to the United States and China. Encouraged by Rusk, McNamara, Bundy, and Rostow, Johnson equated a negotiated settlement with appeasement, recalling the perceived

"lessons" of Munich that aggression unchecked is aggression unleashed. As long the Americans believed, as did the North Vietnamese, that more could be gained on the battlefield than at the negotiating table, a peaceful settlement was impossible.

Only when one or both sides realized the futility of continued war were negotiations conceivable. Johnson and Westmoreland, enamored of their war of attrition, always believed the next troop deployment would finally sap the Communists of their will to fight. While Westmoreland was correct in assuming that the conflict was one of attrition, he never seemed to understand that it was the Americans whose patience for fighting was limited. Meanwhile, those without patience-the Fulbrights, McGovern, Mansfields, and the antiwar protesters-were also, in Johnson's estimation, lacking patriotism.

Johnson's problem, however, was not the incessant cries of his critics for negotiations, but rather his mistaken belief that the conflict in Vietnam could be won entirely on the battlefield. Vietnam was also a political conflict in which the hearts and minds of the people were at stake. No matter how much Johnson and the U.S. military wished it to be, more bombs and more troops could never force the political and economic changes necessary to persuade millions of South Vietnamese that their government in Saigon was worth fighting for. Persuaded that he and his country would be labeled cowards or appeasers if he refused to fight, Johnson sometimes doubted that the application of military force was sufficient but he never seriously-until 1968-considered de-escalation or engaging the North Vietnamese in peace talks.

Although he agonized over the 1965 decisions to begin the bombing campaign and to drastically increase the number of ground troops in South Vietnam, Johnson-having achieved a popular mandate for a more limited American role in Vietnam-allowed himself to become captive to his fear of the partisan political ghosts of the early 1950s. His errors were compounded by the ways he and his advisors deceived the public and Congress about the administration's policy and then ignored or spurned the cautionary advice of Ball, Mansfield, Fulbright, Church, McGovern, and others. Instead of listening and learning from men like Mansfield and Ball, Johnson merely humored them. To his detriment, Johnson also mishandled his detractors in Congress-particularly Robert Kennedy and Fulbright-and forced them to fight him and his war with even more passion and intensity.

But the failed policy in Vietnam was not Johnson's alone. While many members of Congress can be faulted for abdicating their constitutional responsibilities regarding Vietnam, Mansfield, Fulbright, and Richard Russell deserve special mention. Even when it became obvious that Johnson could not achieve his objectives in Vietnam, Mansfield and Russell were loyal soldiers. While possessing enough power and influence to force Johnson to alter course, their perverse, singular sense of loyalty to Johnson prevented them from speaking out in ways that might have saved thousands of lives. At a time when the Senate might have benefited from the passion and initiative of a strong leader, Mansfield and Fulbright were absent, handicapped by their tragic unwillingness to assume the legitimate leadership roles their positions demanded. Yet it is not clear that such leadership would have made a difference. Even the more vociferous opponents of the war proved ineffective because of their fundamental reluctance to coalesce behind any leader, as well as their inability to agree on a single coherent plan to end the war.

Few members of Congress, Morse and Gruening excepted, could ever claim to have clean hands regarding Vietnam. From almost the beginning of the war to its end, the story of Congress was one of a tragic abdication of power and responsibility. While some would later claim the war in Vietnam was mostly a political conflict, hampered by the meddling of politicians who tied the hands of the military commanders in the field, the truth was that Congress meddled in Vietnam almost not at all, and certainly not before 1966 and not

substantially until 1969. It was not until 1975, after the war was virtually over, that members of Congress finally mustered the courage" to withhold funding for the conflict.

Only when Richard Nixon took office did Mansfield begin to lose his reluctance to challenge the commander in chief over Vietnam. By then it was too late. The issue in 1969 was not whether to end the war, but how and how soon. Like Johnson, the American people gave Nixon a mandate to end the fighting. Like Johnson, Nixon-slavishly loyal to Thieu, his perceived political benefactor-squandered it in favor of a deceitful, excruciatingly slow, and deadly withdrawal strategy in pursuit of an illusive "honorable peace." To Nixon and Kissinger, that meant withdrawing U.S. troops slowly enough to leave all parties dissatisfied but not outraged. Nixon did not quite achieve that objective, but Vietnamization, along with his dissolution of the draft, did disarm his critics and allow him to continually claim, even as he escalated and widened the fighting, that the incremental troop withdrawals were proof that the war was all but over.

Nixon refused to stop the fighting for many of the same reasons as Johnson. Like the four presidents before him, the Republican president believed he could not withstand the partisan attacks after a precipitate withdrawal. But by 1969, Nixon knew what Johnson, in 1965, did not: a military victory in Vietnam was impossible short of a massive, overwhelming application of U.S. firepower. That, Nixon knew, would have been political suicide and still would not guarantee a U.S. victory. Nixon, therefore, attempted to split the difference by escalating the bombing in hopes of driving the North Vietnamese to the bargaining table, while he simultaneously deescalated the ground war with his gradual troop withdrawals. Like a gunslinger in a Western movie, Nixon shot his way out, escaping the barroom brawl while he walked backwards toward the door with guns blazing. It was a retreat disguised as an offensive. The ruse worked. By 1972, most Americans assumed the war was over and that Vietnamization had been marginally successful. Nixon won another term in a landslide over McGovern, the war's most visible and vociferous opponent. But Nixon had not won the war, or the honorable peace that he had promised. He had merely delayed the day of the communist victory, with deadly and disastrous consequences.

The Viet Nam War was America's longest armed conflict, a tragic crusade that cost millions of lives and ruined millions more. The war dispelled the widespread and erroneous belief that, in its foreign and military policies, the United States had always exhibited the purest of motives and actions. This, of course, had never been the case, particularly in the twentieth century. From Truman to Nixon, the decisions about Vietnam were almost always made by presidents and other political leaders seeking to preserve or enhance their domestic or international political standings.

While these presidents talked of preserving democratic institutions in Southeast Asia, the massive influx of American manpower and military might in the 1960s actually undermined the ideal of a free and independent South Vietnam and transformed the nation into a client of the United States. By the time the war ended, the region that America had sought to protect from communism was, instead, ruled by it.

At home, the United States became, in some ways, a stronger nation because of its tragic experience in Vietnam. Organized public dissent became a widely accepted and effective way of influencing public policy. The American people and the news media exhibited a more healthy distrust of government officials and their public pronouncements. These and other positive changes, however, came at a horrible cost. In the name of fighting for freedom in Vietnam, the political and military leadership of the United States inflicted untold damage on a proud nation and its people.

Whatever good may have come from the war, and no matter how honorable and brave the soldiers on both sides, the Vietnam War should be remembered as the kind of tragedy that

can result when presidents-captivated by grand delusions-enforce their foreign and military policies without the informed support of Congress and the American people.