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Vietnam and Revisionism

David Culver

American Colonel Summers: "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield."

North Vietnamese Colonel Tu: "That may be so but it is also irrelevant."

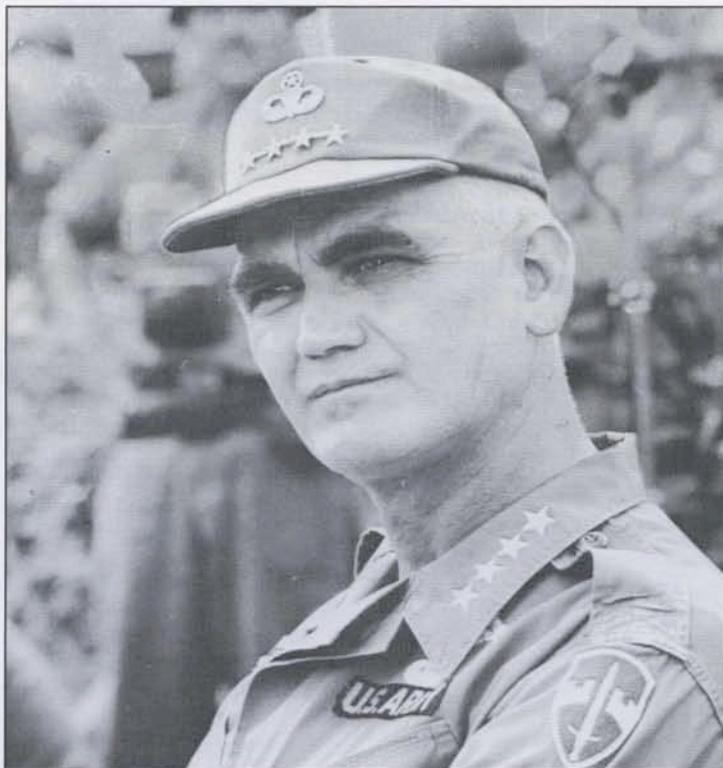
Conversation in Hanoi, April 1975

Last year General William Westmoreland told a Boston College audience that politicians caused America's defeat in Vietnam. "The Vietnam War was not lost on the battlefield," the Commander of United States forces in Vietnam said, "but lost in the halls of Congress."

Westmoreland's charge reflects recent Vietnam War revisionism, the effort to rationalize America's defeat by claiming that United States forces were prevented from winning. Besides the politicians, who reduced military spending, the revisionists' cast of villains includes the media and antiwar dissenters, who turned the nation against the war, and various Presidents, who restricted military operations.

If polls are to be believed, these interpretations are widely held by Americans, especially Vietnam veterans. President Ronald Reagan subscribes to this view. Shortly after his election in 1980, he declared that American troops "were denied permission to win." Revisionism is reflected in our popular culture, reaching its most extreme form in the film *Rambo*, which has its macho superhero ask his superior, "Do we get to win this time?"

That such interpretations strike a responsive chord is understandable. "The war that went wrong" has been a painful and traumatic episode for Americans accustomed to military victory. The cheering for *Rambo* reflects the need of many to resurrect a measure of national honor lost in the war. Revisionism salves the national psyche and restores a self-image of power. However comforting, though, revisionism is simplistic and is narrowly focused. It ignores both the strength of Vietnamese nationalism and the weakness of our client state, South Vietnam, historical factors which go far to explain the outcome of the war. But to understand better this lack of historical



perspective, a brief review of American involvement in Vietnam is in order.

As nearly everyone knows, America's longest and most unpopular war had its origins in the Cold War and the containment of communism that developed in the wake of World War II. As the Soviet Union tightened its grip on Eastern Europe, an alarmed President Harry Truman in 1947 committed the American government to combating Soviet expansion in Europe. The Cold War was official, and containment -- the effort to limit communism to the frontiers already under Soviet control -- became America's principal Cold War strategy.

But by the end of the decade, the United States seemed less secure, communism more threatening. In 1949 the communists triumphed in China and the Russians acquired the bomb. At home a Red Scare was under way, distorting public debate and foreign policy. Soon led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, conservatives vilified the Truman Administration for being soft on communism and for "losing" China. Washington was in near-panic

when it decided to extend containment to Vietnam by openly supporting France in its war in Indochina.

The First (or French) Indochina War (1946-54) erupted when France tried to reestablish its empire in Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) after World War II. Meanwhile, however, in 1945 Ho Chi Minh, a communist and nationalist, had declared the independence of Vietnam and soon war broke out between the French and the Vietminh, a coalition of nationalist groups led by the communists. By late 1949, however, with the war going badly, France appealed for American aid. In the wake of China's fall, Washington, feeling bound to bolster an important ally whose support the United States needed in Europe, acceded to French demands, and in early 1950 took the first step toward a 25-year-war.

This decision to extend containment to Vietnam was part of a new American strategy to counter communist aggression anywhere in the world. "The assault on free institutions is worldwide," a 1950 National Security Coun-

cil report noted ominously. The war in Vietnam (and soon Korea) was seen as part of "the Kremlin's design for world domination." Communism, Washington believed, was monolithic, and communists like Ho were merely pawns of Moscow in a single conspiracy for world power. With China gone, Indochina was the next communist target, and should this region fall, then the surrounding countries (Malaya, Burma, Thailand) would fall like a row of dominoes.

In retrospect, historians question the American assumption that Ho was an agent of Moscow, that Vietnam was a Soviet proxy. Ho was a dedicated communist, but he was also a nationalist, who resisted subservience to both the Soviet Union and China. Ho's drive for power was indigenous and was not initiated by Moscow. Indeed, it was part of a nationalist movement that was sweeping Asia, a powerful historical phenomenon not fully appreciated by American policy makers, nor more recently by revisionists. As George Herring, the author of a major study of the Vietnam War concludes, "Regardless of his ideology, Ho by 1950 had captured the standard of Vietnamese nationalism, and by supporting France, ... the United States was attaching itself to a losing cause." With the colonial era over, then, the United States chose the wrong side of history.

The Vietnam policies developed by the Truman Administration were continued by President Dwight Eisenhower (1953-61). American aid to France grew steadily (by 1954 America was paying for 78% of the cost of the war), but it could not prevent a French defeat. The climax came in early 1954 when the Vietminh surrounded a large French force at Dienbienphu. American military intervention was seriously considered, but rejected by the Eisenhower Administration, and the French force surrendered.

At a conference in Geneva, meanwhile, the future of Indochina was being hammered out at the expense of France. The resulting Geneva Accords of 1954 (which the United States never signed) provided for a military ceasefire, French withdrawal from North Vietnam, and a temporary partition of

Vietnam pending elections scheduled for 1956.

While highly critical of the French for any compromise with communism, the United States moved to establish South Vietnam as a barrier to further communist advances in Southeast Asia. Containment would consist of restricting communism to North Vietnam and treating South Vietnam as an independent country and part of the "free" world.

Despite the French failure and strong warnings of the difficulties of nation-building, the United States pushed the French aside and moved quickly to prop up the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. A nationalist and strong anti-communist, Diem clearly illustrated the enormous task in establishing South Vietnam as the "cornerstone of the Free world in Southeast Asia." He was a Catholic elitist in a Buddhist land, who had many enemies and little popular support. He lacked Ho's reputation, charisma, and vision for the future of Vietnam. The weakness of Diem (and of all South Vietnamese governments) was an intractable problem that would plague American policy to the end and, the revisionists notwithstanding, would have much to do with the war's conclusions.

With American support, Diem consolidated his rule and cancelled the national elections called for by the Geneva Accords. Soon, however, he faced a revolt. The Vietcong, Diem's pejorative term for Vietnamese communists, began a struggle to achieve what they believed had been denied them when Diem cancelled the elections. By the time Eisenhower left office in early 1961, the insurgency, fed by Diem's unpopularity and increasing support from the North, had grown into a formidable movement.

Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy (1961-63), became the third president to try to contain communism in Southeast Asia. Convinced that the struggle there was a test of American resolve, Kennedy was determined not to "lose" Vietnam to communism (no one could ever forget the pounding the Truman Administration took for "losing" China), and so increased the number of American military advisors

to 16,500. But Washington could not provide political stability in Saigon or transform Diem into "the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia," as Vice President Lyndon Johnson publicly hailed him. (Privately, the crude Texan was more candid: "Shit, man, he's the only boy we got there.") By 1963, when it was clear that Diem was losing the war, the Kennedy Administration approved of a coup against Diem, who was subsequently murdered.

In three weeks Kennedy himself was dead. The new President, Lyndon Johnson, inherited a deteriorating situation, despite Diem's elimination. Convinced that American honor, security, and prestige were at stake, Johnson moved to prevent a communist victory.

Following his election in 1964, Johnson began the fateful military involvement. Selective air strikes in February 1965 were followed three weeks later by the massive bombing of North Vietnam and, soon after, by the decision to use American soldiers in battle. By the summer of 1965, the United States was fighting a major undeclared war in Vietnam.

The Johnson Administration believed that a few Marines would be a quick fix, but the war now acquired a life of its own. American escalation was matched by Hanoi with support from China and the Soviet Union. What a frustrated President Johnson exclaimed in 1965 applied to any year of the war: "I can't get out. I can't finish it with what I got. So what the hell can I do?" The answer was more of the same, hoping that a few more troops (550,000 by 1968) or a little more bombing would break the communists' will to fight.

But despite government claims that victory was "around the corner," the United States was losing the war. As if to underscore this, the communists in January 1968 launched the Tet Offensive, a massive attack throughout the south. The communists suffered heavy losses, but not before Americans watched in living color as the Vietcong attacked the American Embassy in Saigon. Tet's psychological effect was devastating and public opinion turned sharply against the war.



Bob Englehart, Hartford Courant

Tet also claimed a political victim. Two months after Tet, President Johnson told a national TV audience he would not run for reelection. He had tried to fight a limited war, quickly, cheaply, and seemed baffled by an enemy that was willing to take such losses and continue to fight. "Just look at the figures and you'll see that they have failed," Johnson said. "Ho's people are just not telling him about his losses." In 1946 Ho had declared, "kill ten of our men and we will kill one of yours. In the end, you will lose and I will win." He was speaking to the French, but the equation applied no less to the Americans. North Vietnam, willing and able to fight longer, would outlast the United States.

If the war forced Johnson from the White House, it helped elect Richard Nixon (1969-74), who was determined to end the war but not lose it. His goal was to preserve South Vietnam as a non-communist state, and his strategy was "Vietnamization" -- turn the fighting over to the South Vietnamese, while withdrawing American troops. To compel Hanoi to make concessions, Nixon intensified the bombing of the North, declaring that "the bastards have never been bombed like they're going to be bombed this time." As Henry Kissinger, Nixon's National Security Adviser insisted, a "fourth-rate power like North Vietnam" must have a "breaking point."

But no matter how much the United States pulverized the North, it could not force the communists to quit. Hanoi had sacrificed too much and was too close to victory. The war dragged on for four more years before the Paris Accords were finally signed in January 1973. But the "peace agreements,"

which provided for a cease-fire and the withdrawal of American troops, did not resolve the political future of South Vietnam, the central issue of the war. The war soon resumed, and in April 1975 the communists marched triumphantly into Saigon, drawing the painful war to a close. 58,000 Americans had died. Twenty-five years of effort had ended in failure.

Americans barely noticed South Vietnam's collapse, preferring to put the disaster out of their minds. The nation was spared a bitter witch hunt in search of those who "lost Vietnam." No one seemed to want to know. But the war still haunts the American memory and colors United States foreign policy. The so-called "Vietnam syndrome" has inhibited the United States abroad. "Will Nicaragua be another Vietnam?" is the subject of debate and cover stories. Thus the question returns to why we lost and the "lessons" of the war. The question is not just academic; it bears on the issue of American power in the world and under what circumstances the United States should again send troops to fight abroad.

Though questions persist and a consensus on the war is still emerging, the revisionists' claim that the defeat was largely self-inflicted is a dubious proposition. Congress, to return to Westmoreland's charge, continued to vote funds well after the public had turned irreversibly against the war. The media, too, reflected, rather than shaped, public opinion. As George Herring has recently written, "Careful research has shown that ... the media and the anti-war movement played no more than peripheral roles in turning the nation against the war."

As for the charge that the military was handcuffed by civilian leaders, the United States could have bombed North Vietnam back to the Stone Age and invaded the North. But would the public have supported a costly invasion against a dedicated foe that would have risked war with China and the Soviet Union (China had threatened to respond if the United States had moved north). In any case, what would have been left after "victory?" As Senator Stuart Symington asked of Secretary of State Dean Rusk: "What do we win if we win?" At the least, it would have meant an indefinite American occupation of Vietnam with all its costs and strains.

Revisionism also underestimates the power of Vietnamese nationalism, whose banner had been captured by Ho and whose goal was to rid Vietnam of foreigners. Secretary Rusk said after the war that he had made two mistakes: underestimating the enemy and overestimating the patience of the American people. Rusk's assessment of the determination, even fanaticism, of the enemy, was correct, but he was wrong about the American public. Sentiment turned against the war because the American government could not persuade its citizens that South Vietnam was vital to our survival and that the war had any chance of success. In the end the public recognized that the American goal of propping up South Vietnam was unachievable. Our client state, flabby and corrupt, could not provide the cohesion or stability to become a viable anti-communist state. And no amount of American aid could change that.

Colonel Summers was correct. American soldiers fought bravely and won the battles. But as Colonel Tu said, it was irrelevant. Vietnam required a political solution; America tried to impose a military solution. Despite all its might, the United States could not impose its will. While Americans discuss the lessons of the war, they seem to recognize one chastening lesson: there are limits to American power in a highly complex world.

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