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AMERICA AND VIETNAM: THE UNENDING WAR

By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!" So said President George Bush in a euphoric victory statement at the end of the Gulf War, suggesting the extent to which Vietnam continued to prey on the American psyche more than fifteen years after the fall of Saigon. Indeed the Vietnam War was by far the most convulsive and traumatic of America's three wars in Asia in the 50 years since Pearl Harbor. It set the U.S. economy on a downward spiral. It left America's foreign policy at least temporarily in disarray, discrediting the postwar policy of containment and undermining the consensus that supported it. It divided the American people as no other event since their own Civil War a century earlier. It battered their collective soul.

Such was the lingering impact of the Vietnam War that the Persian Gulf conflict appeared at times as much a struggle with its ghosts as with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. President Bush's eulogy for the Vietnam syndrome may therefore be premature. Success in the Gulf War no doubt raised the nation's confidence in its foreign policy leadership and its military institutions and weakened long-standing inhibitions against intervention abroad. Still it seems doubtful that military victory over a nation with a population less than one-third of Vietnam in a conflict fought under the most favorable circumstances could expunge deeply encrusted and still painful memories of an earlier and very different kind of war.

To put the Vietnam War in perspective three questions must be addressed. Why did the United States invest so much blood and treasure in an area so remote as Vietnam and of so little apparent significance? Why, despite its vast power, did the United States fail to achieve its objectives? What were the consequences of the war for Americans—and for Vietnamese?

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II

The question of causation in war is always complex, and with Vietnam it is especially so. America's direct involvement there spanned the quarter century between the February 1950 decision to aid France in suppressing the Vietminh revolution and the fall of Saigon in April 1975. The commitment expanded incrementally, from economic and military aid to France during the first Indochina war, to support for an independent South Vietnam after the 1954 Geneva conference, to the commitment of U.S. combat forces in 1965. America thus went to war not from a single major decision but from a series of separate, seemingly small decisions over a period of fifteen years. Amid this complexity, it is necessary to single out the common threads, the modes of thought that determined the fateful course chosen.

In the broadest sense U.S. intervention in Vietnam resulted from the interaction of two major phenomena of the post-World War II era: the dissolution of colonial empires and the start of the Cold War. The rise of nationalism and the weakness of the European powers combined at the end of World War II to destroy a colonial system that had been an established feature of world politics for centuries. Changes of this magnitude do not occur easily, of course, and in this case they brought turmoil and conflict. In South and Southeast Asia, the British and Dutch grudgingly granted independence to their colonies. The French, on the other hand, attempted to regain control of their Indochinese empire and put down the Vietnamese revolution by force, sparking a war in 1946 that in its various phases would not end until 1975.

What was unique and, from the American standpoint, most significant about the conflict in Vietnam was that the revolutionary movement, the Vietminh, was led by communists. Ho Chi Minh, the charismatic father of the revolution, was a longtime communist operative, and although he and his lieutenants deliberately established a broadly nationalist united revolutionary front, they remained firmly in control. Well organized and tightly disciplined, willing to use any means to attain their ends, they took advantage of the fragmentation of other nationalist groups to establish their preeminence. During World War II they exploited popular opposition to French and Japanese occupation forces, and they adeptly moved into the vacuum when the Japanese surren-

dered in August 1945. During the ensuing war with France, they solidified their claim to the mantle of Vietnamese nationalism. Among all the former European colonies of Asia, only in Vietnam did communists direct the nationalist movement. This would have enormous long-range implications, transforming what began as a struggle against French colonialism into a major international conflict.

At the very time the communist-led Vietminh was engaged in a bloody struggle with France the Cold War was assuming global dimensions, and the United States perceived the war in Vietnam largely in terms of its conflict with the Soviet Union. From the outset American officials viewed Ho and the Vietminh as instruments of the Soviet drive for world domination, directed and controlled by the Kremlin, a view that was not seriously challenged until the United States was involved in full-scale war in Vietnam.

The reality was much more complex. Ho and his top associates were communists, deeply committed to establishing in Vietnam at the first opportunity a state based on Marxist-Leninist dogma. In addition, after 1949, the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union assisted the Vietminh and later North Vietnam in many important ways. On the other hand it is equally clear that Ho initiated the revolution without explicit direction from Moscow and sustained it until 1949 without external support. The revolution grew in strength because it was able to identify with Vietnamese nationalism, and it had a dynamism of its own quite apart from international communism. Moreover the support provided by the Soviet Union and China was neither unlimited, unconditional nor unequivocal, and there is ample evidence that at numerous crucial points in the war the three nations did not share anything approaching unanimity of purpose.

All this is much clearer in retrospect than it was at the time, and for nearly twenty years U.S. policymakers viewed the conflict in Vietnam as an integral part of their broader struggle with communism. From this flowed yet another key assumption, that the "loss" of Vietnam would threaten interests deemed vital. There is more than a bit of irony here, for at least until 1940 Vietnam had been of no significance to the United States—a position to which it quickly reverted in the aftermath of the war.

To understand the change it is necessary to look at the reorientation of U.S. foreign policy after the fall of China to

the communists in 1949 and to the emergence of a universalist world view best expressed in a National Security Council document. Drafted in early 1950 in response to the fall of China to Mao Zedong's communists and the Soviet explosion of an atomic bomb, NSC-68 set as its fundamental premise that the U.S.S.R., "animated by a new fanatical faith," was seeking to "impose its absolute authority on the rest of the world." In the frantic milieu of early 1950, American policymakers concluded that Soviet expansion had reached a point beyond which it must not be permitted to go. "Any substantial further extension of the area under the control of the Kremlin," NSC-68 warned, "would raise the possibility that no coalition adequate to confront the Kremlin with greater strength could be assembled."

In this context then—of a world divided into two hostile power blocs, a fragile balance of power, a zero-sum game in which any gain for communism was automatically a loss for the United States—areas that previously had been of no more than marginal importance suddenly took on great significance. The onset of the Korean War in June 1950 seemed to confirm the assumptions of NSC-68 and further suggested that the communists were willing to use military power to achieve their goals. Thus in 1950 the Truman administration extended to East Asia a containment policy that had originally been applied in Europe. The first American commitment in Vietnam, a commitment to help the French suppress the Vietminh revolution, was part of this broader attempt to contain communist expansion in Asia.

There were other more specific reasons why U.S. policymakers attached such significance to Vietnam after 1950. First, the "domino theory" held that the fall of Vietnam would cause the loss of all Indochina and then the rest of Southeast Asia, with implications extending far beyond. The communists had just taken over in China. Indochina, Burma and Malaya were swept by revolution, and the newly independent government of Indonesia seemed vulnerable. Because of its location on *China's southern border and because it appeared in the most imminent danger*, Vietnam was considered crucial. If it fell, all of Southeast Asia might be lost, denying the United States access to important raw materials and strategic waterways.

The threat to Southeast Asia had special implications for Japan. The danger of Japanese conquest of the region in 1940 had first caused Americans to attach strategic importance to

Indochina, producing hard-line policies that led directly to Pearl Harbor. In 1950, ironically, Americans sought to keep Southeast Asia open to Japanese penetration, fearing that the loss of raw materials and markets there could undermine Japan's economic recovery and force a crucial ally to come to terms with communism. For these reasons the United States steadily increased its aid to France and, when France was defeated in 1954, it undertook to build in southern Vietnam an independent noncommunist government as a bulwark against further communist gains in the region.

In the Kennedy-Johnson era the domino theory was supplanted by the notion of credibility, the idea that the United States must stand firm in Vietnam to demonstrate its determination to defend vital interests across the world. During this most intense and dangerous period of the Cold War, U.S. policymakers felt certain that if they showed firmness in one area, it would deter the adversary in another; if they showed weakness, the adversary would be tempted to take steps that might ultimately leave no option but nuclear war. The so-called Manchurian or Munich analogy, the lessons of the 1930s, reinforced the idea of credibility, the obvious conclusion being that a firm stand must be taken against "aggression" at the outset.

Even after the Sino-Soviet split drastically altered the familiar contours of the Cold War in the 1960s, the notion of credibility still seemed valid. China appeared to be more militant and aggressive than the Soviet Union, more deeply committed to world revolution—and it was supporting North Vietnam. Thus North Vietnam had to be deterred to prevent Chinese expansion in Asia. Even in the case of the Soviet Union, seemingly the less dangerous communist power in the aftermath of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, a firm stand would discourage a return to adventurism and reinforce the trend toward détente. It would also deter other potential troublemakers such as Cuba's Fidel Castro.

In searching for the sources of the American commitment in Vietnam, one other factor deserves attention: the assumption shared by administrations from Harry S. Truman to Lyndon B. Johnson that the fall of Vietnam to communism would have disastrous political consequences at home. This assumption also stemmed from perceived lessons of history: the rancorous and divisive debate following the "loss" of China in 1949 and Republican exploitation of the issue at the polls in 1952. The

conclusion, again obvious, was that no administration, especially a Democratic administration, could survive the loss of Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson repeatedly affirmed that he would not be the president who saw Vietnam go the way of China.

The application of the containment policy to Vietnam appears in retrospect misguided. The so-called communist bloc was torn by nationalist divisions from the outset and was never a monolith. And the international situation was never a zero-sum game. What appeared to be a major victory for the Soviet Union in China in 1949, for example, turned out to be something quite different. The United States most probably exaggerated the consequences of nonintervention and, by proclaiming Vietnam a test case of credibility, may have made the consequences of its fall much greater than they would have been otherwise. In applying containment to Vietnam, U.S. officials drastically misjudged the internal dynamics of the conflict there. By rigidly adhering to a narrow, one-dimensional world view, they placed themselves at the mercy of local forces they did not understand and in the final analysis could not control.

III

It has been an article of faith among many Americans that the nation's defeat in Vietnam was self-inflicted. The United States failed, they allege, because it did not use its power wisely or decisively—the civilians forced the military to fight with one hand tied behind its back. In addition, some argue, a hostile and hypercritical media and a near-treasonous antiwar movement turned public opinion against the war, forcing Presidents Johnson and Nixon to scale back U.S. involvement just when victory was within grasp. Such arguments imply, if they do not state outright, that the United States could have prevailed had it used its military power without limit and suppressed domestic dissent. They have provided the basis for numerous “lessons,” some of them applied with a vengeance in the Persian Gulf.

This revisionist view of the war is fundamentally flawed. It accepts as a given what can never be more than mere speculation. There is no way to know whether the war could have been won if it had been fought differently. More important, to attribute U.S. failure to an errant strategy and lack of will

oversimplifies a very complex problem and provides at best a partial explanation.

The strategy applied by President Johnson and his secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, was without question doomed to failure. The theory was that if the United States gradually increased the level of military pain it would reach a point where the Vietnamese communists would decide that the costs were greater than the potential gain. The theory turned out to be wrong. The level of pain Hanoi was prepared to endure was greater than Washington could inflict.

To jump to the conclusion, however, that the unrestricted use of American power could have produced victory in Vietnam at acceptable cost raises troubling questions. We can never know whether a bombing campaign of the sort advocated by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Vietnam, and actually applied in the Gulf War, would have forced Hanoi to accept a settlement on U.S. terms, but there is ample reason to question whether it would have. The technology of 1991 was not available in 1965, and in any event North Vietnam was not vulnerable to air power in the way Iraq was vulnerable. The capacity of air power to cripple a preindustrial society was in fact quite limited. Even if the United States had destroyed the cities and industries of North Vietnam, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the Vietnamese were prepared to fight on, underground if necessary.

Invasion of enemy sanctuaries in Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam might have made General William C. Westmoreland's attrition strategy more workable, but such steps would also have raised the costs of the war far out of proportion to the stakes and at a time when American resources were already stretched thin. Neither intensified bombing nor escalation of the ground war would have solved what was always the central problem—the political viability of South Vietnam.

The reasons why President Johnson refused to expand the war must also be considered. He feared that if the United States pushed North Vietnam to the brink of defeat, the Soviet Union, China or both might intervene, broadening the conflict to dangerous proportions, perhaps even to the level of nuclear confrontation. Whether Johnson's fears were justified can never be known, of course, but he would have been foolish in 1965–67 to have dismissed them out of hand. Destruction of North Vietnam would have been counterproductive in terms of the larger U.S. goal of containing China. In any event there

was no reason for Johnson to push the war to the brink of a nuclear confrontation as long as he assumed that American goals could be achieved with less risk. And even if the United States had been able to militarily subdue North Vietnam without provoking outside intervention, it would still have faced the dangerous and costly task of occupying a hostile nation along China's southern border while simultaneously suppressing an insurgency in South Vietnam.

In terms of public opinion, there is no question but that after 1967 disillusionment with the war placed major constraints on policymakers, and the antiwar movement and U.S. media played a part in this. Critics of the war exposed error and self-deception in official statements, stimulating public doubt about the trustworthiness and wisdom of government and its leaders. Antiwar demonstrations also affected public opinion indirectly, contributing to the rise of domestic strife that fed a general, pervasive war-weariness, which in turn stimulated pressures for de-escalation and withdrawal. As for the media, reporting of the war was sometimes sensationalized and often ahistorical and ethnocentric. The early misreporting of the 1968 Tet offensive has been well documented, and after Tet the media undoubtedly became more critical of the war.

Still, the impact of the antiwar movement and the media on public opinion has been exaggerated. Careful studies of the polls indicate that until very late a majority of Americans considered the antiwar movement more obnoxious than the war. Thus in a perverse sort of way, and to a point, antiwar demonstrations may have strengthened support for the war. There is no persuasive evidence that it was the media that turned public opinion against the war; many social scientists contend that media content generally reinforces rather than changes existing views. In any event the antiwar movement and the media had much less impact on public opinion than the growing cost of the war in terms of lives lost and taxes paid. In this regard it is instructive to note that trends in popular support for the Vietnam War follow almost exactly those for the Korean War, where there was no antiwar movement and media coverage was generally uncritical.

The problem with all such explanations is that they are too ethnocentric. They reflect the persistence of what British writer D. W. Brogan once called "the illusion of American omnipotence," the belief that the difficult we do tomorrow, the impossible may take awhile. When failure occurs it must be our

fault, and we seek scapegoats in our midst: the poor judgment of our leaders, the media, the antiwar movement. The flaw in this approach is that it ignores the other side of the picture. The sources of America's frustration and ultimate failure must also be found in the local circumstances of the war: the nature of the conflict, the weakness of America's ally and the strength of its adversary.

The Vietnam War posed extremely difficult challenges for Americans. It was fought in a climate and on a terrain that were singularly inhospitable: thick jungles, foreboding swamps and paddies, rugged mountains, insufferable heat and humidity. The climate and terrain neutralized America's technological superiority and control of the air. Needless to say those who had endured the land for centuries had a distinct advantage over outsiders, particularly when the latter came from a highly industrialized and urbanized environment.

In the beginning, at least, it was a people's war, where people rather than territory were the primary objective. Yet Americans as individuals and as a nation could never really bridge the vast cultural gap that separated them from all Vietnamese. Not knowing the language or culture, they had difficulty at times even distinguishing between friend and foe. Their mission was at best morally ambiguous and, however benevolent their intentions, Americans often found themselves on the wrong side of Vietnamese nationalism. In this context America's lavish and even reckless use of airpower and firepower was counterproductive, destroying, in the immortal words of the defender of Ben Tre, the very society the United States was purporting to save.

More important perhaps was the formless, yet lethal, nature of warfare in Vietnam, a war without distinct battlelines or fixed objectives, where traditional concepts of victory and defeat were blurred. This type of war was particularly difficult for Americans schooled in the conventional warfare of World War II and Korea. And there was always the gnawing—but fundamental—question, first raised by John F. Kennedy: how can we tell if we are winning? The only answer that could be devised was the notorious body count, as grim and corrupting as it was ultimately unreliable as a measure of success.

Even more important in explaining the U.S. failure was the unequal balance of forces it inherited in Vietnam. In South Vietnam, Americans attempted a truly formidable undertaking on a very weak foundation. The country to which they

committed themselves in 1954 lacked many of the essential ingredients for nationhood. Indeed there was hardly a less promising place in the world to conduct an experiment in nation-building. Vietnam's economy had been devastated by the first Indochina war. The French had destroyed the traditional political order, and their departure left a gaping vacuum—no firmly established political institutions, no native elite willing to work with the United States and capable of exercising effective leadership. Southern Vietnam was rent by a multitude of conflicting ethnic, religious and political forces. When viewed from this perspective, there were probably built-in limits to what the United States could have accomplished there.

For nearly twenty years, Americans struggled to establish a viable nation in the face of internal insurgency and external invasion, but the rapid collapse of South Vietnam after U.S. military withdrawal in 1973 suggests how little was really accomplished. The United States could never find leaders capable of mobilizing the disparate population of southern Vietnam—the fact that it had to look for them suggests the magnitude of the problem. Washington launched a vast array of ambitious and expensive programs to promote sound government, win the hearts and minds of the people, and defeat the insurgents. When its client state was on the verge of collapse in 1965 the United States filled the vacuum with its own combat forces. Ironically—and tragically—the more it did, the more it induced dependency among those it was trying to help. Consequently, right up to the fall of Saigon in 1975, the South Vietnamese elite expected the United States to return and rescue them from defeat. This is not to make the South Vietnamese scapegoats for U.S. failure. It is rather to suggest that, given the history of southern Vietnam and the conditions that prevailed there in 1954, the creation of a viable nation by an outside power may have been impossible.

From beginning to end the United States also drastically underestimated the strength, determination and staying power of its adversary. This is not to suggest that the North Vietnamese and the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam were superhuman. They made colossal blunders and paid an enormous price for their success. They have shown a far greater capacity for making war than for nation-building. Still, in terms of the local balance of forces, they had tremendous advantages. They were tightly mobilized and

regimented and deeply committed to their goals. They skillfully employed the strategy of protracted war, already tested against France, perceiving that the Americans, like the French, would become impatient and, if they bled long enough, might weary of the war. "You will kill ten of our men, but we will kill one of yours," Ho Chi Minh once remarked, "and in the end it is you who will tire." The comment was made to a French general on the eve of the first Indochina war, but it is an accurate commentary on the second as well.

America's fatal error, therefore, was to underestimate its foe. U.S. policymakers rather casually assumed that the Vietnamese, rational beings like themselves, would know better than to stand up against the most powerful nation in the world. It would be like a filibuster in Congress, Johnson once predicted: enormous resistance at first, then a steady whittling away, then Ho Chi Minh hurrying to get it over with. Years later Henry Kissinger still confessed surprise that his North Vietnamese counterparts were fanatics. Since their own goals were limited and from their standpoint more than reasonable, Americans found it difficult to understand the total unyielding commitment of the enemy, the willingness to risk everything to achieve an objective.

The circumstances of the war thus posed a dilemma that Americans never really understood, much less resolved. Success would probably have required the physical annihilation of North Vietnam, but given the limited American goals this would have been distasteful and excessively costly. It ran a serious risk of Soviet and Chinese intervention and would have been counterproductive by creating a vacuum into which China would flow. The only other way was to establish a viable South Vietnam, but given the weak foundation from which America worked and the cultural gap, not to mention the strength of the internal revolution, this was probably beyond its capacity. To put it charitably, the United States may have placed itself in a classic no-win situation.

IV

The regional and international impact of the Vietnam War was far less than had been predicted. Outside of Indochina, the dominoes did not fall. On the contrary, in Southeast Asia the noncommunist nations prospered and attained unprecedented stability. The Soviet Union continued to build up its military arsenal in the 1970s and, perhaps spurred by Ameri-

can failure, intervened in civil wars in Angola, Zaire and Ethiopia. Like the Americans, however, the Soviets' reach soon exceeded their grasp, luring them into their own quagmire in Afghanistan, a "bleeding wound" that Mikhail Gorbachev lacerated only at great cost.

One of the most significant and ironic consequences of the war was to heighten tensions among the communist nations of East Asia. The brutal Pol Pot regime launched a grisly effort to rebuild Cambodia from the "Year Zero," killing millions of its own people in the process. More important from the Vietnamese standpoint, Cambodia established close ties with China. In response to Khmer Rouge raids and to preserve a "friendly" government next door, Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978, drove Pol Pot out of power and established a puppet regime. China retaliated by invading Vietnam, provoking a short and inconclusive war. The United States, which had gone to war in Vietnam to contain China, found itself in the mid-1980s indirectly supporting China's efforts to contain Vietnam and, through the Reagan Doctrine, sending "humanitarian" aid to an unlikely collection of Cambodian bedfellows including the notorious Pol Pot.

For Vietnam the principal legacy of the war was continued human suffering. The ultimate losers were the South Vietnamese. Many of those who remained in Vietnam endured poverty, oppression, forced labor and "reeducation" camps. More than 1.5 million so-called boat people fled the country after 1975. Some perished in flight; others languished in squalid refugee camps in Southeast Asia. Between 750,000 and one million eventually resettled in the United States. The popular stereotype of the Vietnamese-American was one of assimilation and overachievement. In reality many remained unassimilated and lived near or below the poverty line, depending on minimum-wage jobs or welfare. The new immigrants also endured alienation, encountered prejudice from Americans for whom they were a living reminder of defeat, and suffered from the popular image of the successful Asian, which implied that the unsuccessful had only themselves to blame.

Even for the winners victory was a bittersweet prize. The Hanoi regime attained—at least temporarily—its goal of hegemony in Indochina, but at enormous cost. In time it was bogged down in its own "Vietnam" in Cambodia, for a decade waging a costly and ineffectual counterinsurgency against

stubborn Cambodian guerrillas. Its long-standing goal of unifying Vietnam was achieved in name only. Historic differences between north and south were exacerbated during three decades of war, and even the most heavy-handed methods could not force the freewheeling and resilient south into a made-in-Hanoi mold. Most mortifying for many Vietnamese, long after the end of the war their country remained dependent on the Soviet Union.

For all Vietnamese the most pressing legacy of the war was grinding poverty and economic deprivation. Thirty years of conflict left the nation's economy in a shambles, and continued high military expenditures and the government's ill-conceived efforts to force industrialization and collectivize agriculture made things worse. The economic growth rate lagged at 2 percent, and per capita income averaged around \$100. Responding to necessity and emulating its Soviet ally, a more pragmatic regime in the mid-1980s launched a program of *doi moi*, or renovation, hoping to stimulate economic growth by freeing up the economy, providing some capitalist incentives and seeking foreign investment. Declaring 1990 the "Year of the Tourist," Hanoi even sought to promote economic development through tourism.

Renovation brought at best modest gains. Agriculture flourished under the new system, and Vietnam again became an exporter of rice. The parallel or unofficial economy also prospered, especially in the cities, where there were signs of an incipient economic boom. There were small increases in the production of consumer goods and in foreign trade. On the other hand the infrastructure remained in horrible shape. Foreign investment did not develop as anticipated, and the economy suffered from ineffective management and lack of capital and technology. The move toward a free-market system was chaotic. Intent on insulating itself from the changes that swept the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, the regime did not join economic change with political freedoms, thus mitigating the impact of *doi moi*. The growth rate rose only to 3.5 percent by 1990, and per capita income was still estimated at no more than \$175. Vietnam continued to live hand to mouth, and the termination of aid from the Soviet Union and eastern Europe threatened to offset its limited gains.

Although the United States emerged physically unscathed, the Vietnam War was among the most debilitating in its history. The economic cost has been estimated at \$167 billion,

a raw statistic that does not begin to measure its impact. The war triggered the inflation that helped to undermine America's position in the world economy. It also had a high political cost, along with Watergate, increasing popular suspicion of government, leaders and institutions. It crippled the military, at least for a time, and temporarily estranged the United States from much of the rest of the world.

Nowhere was the impact of Vietnam greater than on the nation's foreign policy. The war destroyed the consensus that had existed since the late 1940s, leaving Americans confused and deeply divided on the goals to be pursued and the methods used. From the Angolan crisis of the mid-1970s to Central America in the 1980s to the Persian Gulf in 1990, foreign policy issues were viewed through the prism of Vietnam and debated in its context. Popular divisions on the gulf crisis derived to a large extent from the Vietnam experience, and the Gulf War was fought on the basis of its perceived lessons.

Much like World War I for the Europeans, Vietnam's greatest impact was in the realm of the spirit. As no other event in the nation's history, it challenged Americans' traditional beliefs about themselves, the notion that in their relations with other people they had generally assumed a benevolent role, the idea that nothing was beyond reach. It was a fundamental part of a much larger crisis of the spirit that began in the 1960s, raising profound questions about America's history and values. The war's deep wounds still fester among some of its 2.7 million veterans, for whom victory in the Persian Gulf reinforced rather than erased bitter memories. The persisting popularity of Vietnam novels, television shows and films suggests the extent to which the war is still etched in the nation's consciousness and will probably continue to be so despite the Persian Gulf.

v

Today more than fifteen years after the fall of Saigon the United States continues to treat Vietnam as an enemy, and thus legally and technically the war goes on. Not surprisingly, perhaps, America has been far less generous with the foe that embarrassed it than with those nations it defeated in World War II. Washington refused to establish normal diplomatic relations, maintained an economic embargo under the Trading With the Enemy Act of 1917 and, through its veto, blocked

aid to Vietnam from international lending agencies. Ironically its economic warfare has been far more effective than its military operations ever were, leaving Vietnam isolated politically and economically and deprived of the trade, technology and capital so desperately needed for reconstruction.

Fault for continuation of the war lies partly with Vietnam, to be sure. The victim of its own hubris, it bungled an opportunity to normalize relations in 1977 by demanding \$3 billion in "reparations" as a precondition and by appearing indifferent to the fate of the more than 2,500 U.S. servicemen still listed as missing in action. Although it removed the brutal Pol Pot regime, Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia gave the United States another pretext for refusing to normalize relations. As Soviet-American tensions grew in the early 1980s and the United States moved closer to China, Vietnam once more became a pawn in and victim of the great power struggle.

Perpetuation of the deadlock owes more to the United States. Seeking to break out of its isolation and to secure Western assistance, Vietnam since the mid-1980s has attempted to accommodate American demands, taking quite extraordinary steps on the MIA issue, withdrawing from Cambodia and using its influence to promote a political settlement there. Now back on top, however, the United States has taken a consistently hard line, linking normalization to resolution of MIA issues and to a final peace settlement in Cambodia. U.S. policy may be motivated in part by a desire to punish Vietnam. The Bush administration may also hope, by continuing to squeeze Hanoi, to topple one of the last communist dominoes, winning by economic means the military victory the United States was denied, thereby erasing the stigma of defeat. In addition, although public opinion polls indicate support for normalization and business groups actively promote it, the administration may see little tangible gain.

The U.S. position seems unnecessarily rigid. The number of unresolved MIA cases—2,273—is small compared to the usual wartime percentage of MIAs to casualties. With each year, it becomes harder to locate and identify remains, and it seems unreasonable to demand that the Vietnamese use their limited resources to address American concerns when their country is an economic basket case and they claim to have hundreds of thousands of MIAs of their own. A Cambodian settlement appears imminent, but it will be fragile and vulnerable to attack from numerous angles, and to make normalization

contingent on forces the Vietnamese cannot control seems unreasonable. Perhaps never in the history of warfare has the loser been able to impose such harsh terms on the ostensible winner.

The time has come to end the Vietnam War. The United States will gain little in terms of trade or geopolitical advantage, to be sure, and normalization will not make the problems left over from the war magically disappear. Still, reconciliation is a necessary first step toward real peace, and the remaining wounds of war in and between both countries cannot be healed until such a step is taken.

VI

In light of the dramatic events of the last two years Americans may be tempted to view the Vietnam War as an anomaly. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire and the demise of communism leave the government of Vietnam an apparent anachronism, one of a handful of regimes clinging to a discredited doctrine. In this context it would be easy for Americans to regard the Vietnam War as little more than a tactical defeat in what turned out to be a strategic victory, a lost battle in a Cold War eventually won. In the larger scheme of post-World War II history, Vietnam might come to be seen as unimportant or even irrelevant.

Americans would err grievously to view their longest and most divisive war in such terms. Whether the United States in fact won the Cold War is at best arguable. In any event it remains important for Americans to understand why their nation intervened in Vietnam and why ultimately it failed. Morality and legality aside, by wrongly attributing the conflict in Vietnam to world communism, Americans drastically misjudged the conflict's origins and nature. By intervening in what was essentially a local struggle, they placed themselves at the mercy of local forces, a weak client and a determined adversary. What might have remained a local conflict with primarily local implications was elevated into a major international conflict with enormous human costs that are still being paid. Along with Afghanistan, Vietnam should stand as an enduring testament to the pitfalls of interventionism and the limits of power, something that may be more vital than ever to keep in mind after the deceptively easy military victory in the Persian Gulf.

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