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VIETNAM: HOW DID WE GET THERE? WHERE DO WE GO FROM
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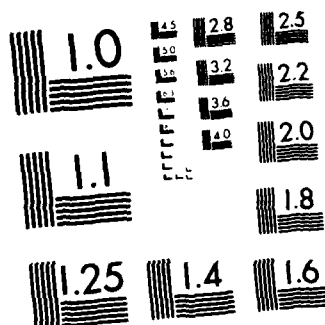
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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM
1. REPORT NUMBER	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO.	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER
	AD A130700	
4. TITLE (and Subtitle)		5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED
Vietnam: How Did We Get There? Where Do We Go From Here?		Study Project
		6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER
		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s)
7. AUTHOR(s)		
LTC Lemos L. Fulmer, Jr.		
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS
US Army War College Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013		
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS		12. REPORT DATE
Same		May 1983
		13. NUMBER OF PAGES
		35
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office)		15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report)
		Unclassified
		15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE
16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report)		
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.		
17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)		
18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)		
20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)		
This paper begins with an examination of the question "Vietnam: How Did We Get There?" In Part I, twenty-three rationales for our involvement in Vietnam (extracted by Nebraska University Professor Hugh M. Arnold from official sources during the period 1949-1967) are analyzed, including a comparison of the views of the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson Administrations; and a comparison of classified rationales with unclassified rationales. It then discusses the conduct of the war in terms of these rationales. Part II examines why we failed to achieve our objectives in Vietnam and examines the limited war		

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theories that governed our involvement. Part III examines the question, "Where Do We Go From Here?" and draws three primary strategic lessons: (1) that public support is a critical factor in strategic planning, (2) that the US is not invincible, and (3) that there is a need for a consistent military strategy.

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Vietnam: How Did We Get There?

Where do we go from here?

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by

Lieutenant Colonel Lemos L. Fulmer, Jr.

for

United States Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania
1 May 1983



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INTRODUCTION

So much that has been written about Vietnam has come out of an antiwar perspective that reading through the literature leaves one with the impression that the men who made the decisions leading to an ever-deepening American involvement must all have been madmen and fools.¹

The purpose of this paper is to review the key decisions of the Vietnam war and to assess their validity at the time they occurred. Twenty-twenty hindsight will not be applied, nor will there be an attempt to prophesy what other outcomes might have occurred had different alternatives been chosen. The basic premise employed will be that at the time of involvement, the United States was the most powerful and influential nation in the world, and that our leadership was comprised of competent, well-advised statesmen.

Through research of public documents, it will be shown in Part One that the major issues of the war were resolved by the democratic process; and that decisions and policies put forth by our various leaders were based on the best advice available and were, at the time of their making, logical and in the best interest of the country. Utilizing this information, an attempt will be made in Part Two to answer why, with all of our power, wisdom and enlightened leadership, we were denied our objectives. In conclusion, Part Three, an examination will be made of possible future

¹Norman Podhoretz, Why We Were In Vietnam (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 16.

United States involvements in limited war, and how we might apply what we have learned from our Vietnam experience in order to avoid another such catastrophic defeat.

PART I

The first issue that must be addressed is how and why the United States initially became involved in Vietnam, and what was the rationale for later continuing our efforts. One of the most informative studies conducted on this subject was done by Hugh M. Arnold and published in the September/October 1975 issue of "Asian Affairs" Magazine. Drawing from statements and documents of those who were actually in power, Mr. Arnold attempted to determine quantitatively the specific rationales cited for United States policy during the period 1949-1967. To accomplish this, he identified twenty-three separate rationales frequently referred to by official sources. They are as follows:

- (1) A simple response to aggression against an ally; self-defense. (Aggression)
- (2) The threat of communism or Communist expansion--general. (Communism)
- (3) The threat of communism or Communist expansion--Russian. (Moscow)
- (4) The threat of communism or Communist expansion--Chinese. (Peking)
- (5) The "domino" theory; the argument that the loss of one state inevitably leads to the loss of others, whether labelled "domino" or not. (Domino)
- (6) The effect of the loss of Vietnam on other states, both in concrete terms and psychologically. (Psychological)
- (7) To attain peace and avoid a larger war by stopping it now ("it" being communism, aggression, the Viet Cong, and so forth). (Munich)

- (8) Economic reasons--vital raw materials, agricultural resources, markets, or people of the area. (Economic)
- (9) The strategic value of the area. (Strategic)
- (10) SEATO. (SEATO)
- (11) Violations of the 1954 Geneva cease-fire agreements. (Geneva)
- (12) The Tonkin Gulf Resolution. (Tonkin)
- (13) Vietnam as a "test case" for wars of liberation. (Test Case)
- (14) The U.S. role as a leader of the Free World, and the moral obligation stemming from this. (Moral)
- (15) To help South Vietnam (and other small nations) maintain their independence. (Help)
- (16) The integrity of American Commitments. (Integrity)
- (17) Commitments of predecessors. (Predecessors)
- (18) Because we were requested by South Vietnam to help. (Request)
- (19) Because our involvement was vital to our security, or in the national interest. (National Interest)
- (20) To maintain internal security in South Vietnam. (Pacification)
- (21) To train indigenous forces. (Train)
- (22) To advise indigenous forces. (Advise)
- (23) Others. (Others)²

Further, Arnold identified twelve separate decision-making categories including:

- (1) President
- (2) Secretary of State
- (3) Executive aide or representative

²Hugh M. Arnold, "Official Justifications for America's Role in Indochina, 1949-67," Asian Affairs, September/October 1975, pp. 31-32.

- (4) Executive aide or representative
- (5) Joint Chiefs of Staff
- (6) Military aide or representative, or military branch report
- (7) Defense Department
- (8) Special committee or task force
- (9) Communique of discussions (when it is a mixed discussion, that is, not within one branch)
- (10) National Security Council
- (11) Central Intelligence Agency, or other intelligence agency
- (12) Others³

Table One below, the first table provided by Arnold, gives the total number of times each theme or justification was used and the percentage of the materials in which each theme was noted. For his analysis, Arnold noted a theme only once from a single paragraph, no matter how many times it appeared within that paragraph. As can be seen, the general threat of communism (theme 2) was the most frequently used rationale for U.S. actions in Indochina, appearing a total of 727 times and in 46.8 per cent of the documents and statements. The total number of references to communism in any form--general or specific--(themes 2,3,4) was 1,141; and 76.1 per cent of all the material analyzed contained a reference to some form of communism. It can be easily noted that the threat of Chinese communism was cited by the decision-makers much more frequently than was the threat of Russian communism, with 333 references to Peking and only 81 to Moscow.

³Ibid., pp. 34.35.

TABLE ONE
OVERALL VIEW⁴

THEME	TOTAL REFERENCES	% OF MATERIAL CONTAINING THEME
(1) Aggression	695	40.0
(2) Communism	727	46.8
(3) Moscow	81	5.2
(4) Peking	333	24.1
(5) Domino	108	8.9
(6) Psychological	231	16.3
(7) Munich	122	12.5
(8) Economic	177	6.0
(9) Strategic	149	10.1
(10) SEATO	126	9.5
(11) Geneva	166	11.9
(12) Tonkin	36	3.0
(13) Test Case	104	7.5
(14) Moral	41	4.1
(15) Help	377	35.0
(16) Integrity	244	19.2
(17) Predecessors	173	13.4
(18) Request	73	6.9
(19) National Interest	260	11.5
(20) Pacification	234	15.6
(21) Train	298	18.8
(22) Advise	131	9.5
(23) Others	117	11.5

Communism--general, Russian and Chinese (2,3,4)	1,141	76.1

Table Two, below, is a compilation of Arnold's four tables which list the rationales as used throughout the four different administrations (Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson). As Arnold points out, the true basis for comparison of usage lies in the percentages (which are shown below) rather than the actual number of references to each theme.

⁴Ibid., p. 36.

TABLE TWO
COMPARATIVE VIEW BY ADMINISTRATION⁵

THEME	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL			
	TRUMAN	E'HOWER	KENNEDY	JOHNSON
(1) Aggression	1.3	2.6	6.0	23.1
(2) Communism	19.4	26.6	20.0	6.8
(3) Moscow	10.5	2.1	1.0	*
(4) Peking	14.3	9.4	3.3	5.0
(5) Domino	4.0	4.3	2.1	*
(6) Psychological	7.6	6.3	4.0	3.4
(7) Munich	*	1.2	1.0	3.7
(8) Economic	13.3	9.1	*	*
(9) Strategic	10.7	5.6	2.0	*
(10) SEATO	0	*	1.1	4.3
(11) Geneva	0	*	2.9	5.5
(12) Tonkin	0	0	0	1.6
(13) Test Case	0	0	*	3.8
(14) Moral	*	*	2.3	*
(15) Help	2.9	4.8	7.5	9.4
(16) Integrity	0	*	3.0	6.1
(17) Predecessors	0	*	*	6.2
(18) Request	0	*	2.0	1.9
(19) National Interest	6.7	6.1	3.4	5.0
(20) Pacification	4.7	6.8	7.9	3.1
(21) Train	1.8	10.7	17.0	1.9
(22) Advise	0	*	6.8	2.5
(23) Others	1.1	2.0	2.6	2.6

Communism--general, Russian and Chinese (2,3,4)	44.1	38.1	24.3	11.8

* Indicates less than one per cent

Examination of Table Two reveals that throughout the administrations studied, the fear of communism was the paramount rationale for U.S. involvement in Vietnam. It is also interesting

⁵Ibid., pp. 38, 39, 41, 43.

to note that the aggression theme (theme 1) rose steadily in prominence over the years, with its ranking in importance to each administration as follows: Truman twelfth, Eisenhower eleventh, Kennedy sixth and Johnson first. This rise also corresponds to the increase in magnitude of U.S. involvement. Additionally, theme 16--the integrity of American commitment--rose consistently through the four administrations: Truman twentieth, Eisenhower fifteenth, Kennedy tenth and Johnson third. According to Arnold, "The willingness of the United States to act against revolutions and insurgencies with optimum--even nuclear--force, in order to sustain the credibility of its pacts and alliances, begin to appear with regularity in classified documents."⁶

Table Three which follows is also compiled from Arnold's statistics, and it suggests that there was a marked difference between private (classified) and public justifications for the war. Some of the most striking examples of this difference are found in the use of themes one, ten, thirteen, fourteen, seventeen and eighteen as predominantly public.

⁶ Ibid., p. 44, citing Gravel Edition, Vol. I, pp. 418, 494.

TABLE THREE
COMPARISON OF CLASSIFIED AND PUBLIC STATEMENTS⁷

THEME	CLASSIFIED		PUBLIC	
	TOT REF	% MAT	TOT REF	% MAT
(1) Aggression	30	8.0	666	59.6
(2) Communism	436	59.1	291	39.2
(3) Moscow	57	8.3	24	3.3
(4) Peking	167	27.2	166	22.2
(5) Domino	85	16.3	23	4.3
(6) Psychological	141	19.8	90	14.1
(7) Munich	19	5.8	103	16.7
(8) Economic	162	12.1	15	2.2
(9) Strategic	118	17.4	31	5.7
(10) SEATO	3	1.0	123	14.7
(11) Geneva	4	1.0	162	18.4
(12) Tonkin	0	0	36	4.9
(13) Test Case	4	1.0	100	11.4
(14) Moral	4	1.0	37	5.9
(15) Help	65	16.6	312	46.3
(16) Integrity	55	10.5	189	24.5
(17) Predecessors	5	1.3	168	20.8
(18) Request	5	1.3	68	10.4
(19) National Interest	74	13.1	186	26.7
(20) Pacification	179	28.1	55	7.8
(21) Train	231	32.9	67	10.2
(22) Advise	96	15.3	35	5.9
(23) Others	48	12.8	69	10.8
----- Communism--general, Russian and Chinese (2,3,4)	660	94.6	481	64.7

For example, the aggression theme (theme 1) which had risen to the rank of primary importance by the Johnson administration, was one of the most widely used publically; however, it ranked fifteenth in classified documents. Even though there had been no direct offensive against the United States, this traditional

⁷Ibid., pp. 46-47.

rationale for war--that one is only responding in self-defense--increasingly became a public justification for U.S. leaders as more and more American soldiers were directly engaged in combat, and the number of casualties continued to escalate.⁸

With theme 10 (SEATO) 97.6 per cent of the uses were public references, for privately it was decided that "...our only treaty commitment in that area is to our SEATO partners, and they have--without exception--viewed the situation in South Vietnam as not calling the treaty into play."^{9,10} Theme 13 (Test Case) appeared publically in 96 per cent of its uses and attained prominence as the war escalated. "It was difficult to justify the American lives lost, the tens of millions of dollars expended each day, unless the stakes were truly global; and theme 13 suggested they were."¹¹

Theme 14 (Moral) was used publically in 90 per cent of the cases, theme 17 (Actions or commitments of predecessors) had 97 percent of its uses publically, and theme 18 (Request) was referred to publically 93 per cent of the time. These all tend to present an altruistic overtone and might be viewed as candy-coated food for public consumption.

⁸Ibid., p. 42.

⁹Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰It should be remembered that SEATO was conceived by Secretary of State John F. Dulles in the wake of the French defeat at Dienbienphu to legitimize U.S. interest and, therefore, involvement in Indochina.

¹¹Arnold, "Justifications," p. 45.

On the other hand, several themes were used almost exclusively in private or classified ways. Theme 8 (Economic) was cited 92 per cent of the time in a classified manner, its use growing more frequent as the American role in Vietnam escalated. Arnold suggests that "Perhaps it was viewed as confirming the Marxist thesis that wars are fought for material means, or merely unwise politically to stress economic factors while American soldiers were fighting and dying..."¹² The strategic theme (theme 9) was cited 79 percent privately, and like the economic rationale, it was concerned with the regional access to Indochina. Additionally, themes that tended to stress the means, rather than the ends, were aired more frequently in private than in public.

As Arnold points out, "The most striking point...is that the themes stressed in private were simply not the same ones offered to the public--with two exceptions. These were the communism theme, and the specific threat of Communist China, both of which were predominantly mentioned in both internal and external materials."¹³ Among the nine most prolific rationales, both private and public, these two are the only ones which appear in common.

Arnold's work is important for two primary reasons. First, it shows that in the minds of our nation's leaders there were valid and logical reasons for our actions in Indochina. While one

¹²Ibid., p. 47.

¹³Ibid., p. 47.

could perhaps argue the individual rationales offered, their collective validity should be obvious. It is equally obvious both in the public and private statements that our motives were not aggression, domination of the Vietnamese people or world conquest. It is the opinion of this author that initially, and for many years thereafter, our nation's leaders sincerely felt an obligation, need and logical basis for our involvement.

The second significant point developed by Arnold is that although our leadership had good reason for its actions, it was not in all cases totally honest with the American people. Although this author does not believe it was their intention to lie to or dupe the public, the integrity of our leaders, specifically the military leaders, became a major issue with the anti-war movement and in fact continues today. General William C. Westmoreland's current legal action against the Columbia Broadcasting System over his alleged falsification of intelligence reports is perhaps the most well-known example.

At this point, each administration will be reviewed to determine the major specific decisions that had the greatest impact on the final outcome of the conflict. While the scope of this essay does not allow for coverage of all the key determinations, the writer will discuss what he believes to be the most critical. In each instance, the facts and events surrounding the main issue shall be examined, and an attempt will be made to demonstrate that--at the moment of it's making--it was the only logical course of action.

Our initial involvement in Vietnam began with President Harry S. Truman's decision to provide United States support for the French efforts in Indochina. Contrary to the views of many anti-war critics, the motive for this action was not expansionism or economics. As Marvin Kalb and Elie Able state in their book Roots of Involvement, "We found no substantial evidence that the United States was driven by imperialist motives--as the neo-marxist would have us believe--to search for markets and raw materials--i.e., profits--in Vietnam."¹⁴

It made sense to support the French in 1946 for several reasons. Stalin's actions were seen as a threat to Western Europe, and France was a long-time European ally whose role was seen as key in the future of NATO. Additionally, the French efforts against the Viet Minh were seen as a natural extension of the fight against the expansion of monolithic communism.

From the period 1943 to 1952 it appeared to the Truman administration that communism was on the move everywhere: Czechoslovakia; Yugoslavia; Poland and other East European countries; the Berlin Blockade; Mao's conquest of China; and the Moscow-supported, Chinese-encouraged, North Korean invasion of South Korea. In the words of President Truman, "...The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer interdependent nations and will now use armed invasion and war."¹⁵ He followed

¹⁴Marvin Kalb and Elie Able, Roots of Involvement (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971), p. 11.

¹⁵Julius W. Pratt, A History of United States Foreign Policy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959), p. 740.

the statement with action by accelerating military assistance to the French in Indochina. As Kalb and Abel have stated, "This was a fateful decision; no one yet realized how fateful."¹⁶

At the time, the voices of objection were few; however, one voice in particular stands out. Senator John F. Kennedy stated, "In Indochina we have allied ourselves to the desperate effort of the French regime to hang on to the remnants of an Empire."¹⁷ But it made sense to aid an ally in the fight against the spread of communism. And so--for logical, solid reasons--the United States was becoming more and more of a partner in the conflict in Vietnam.

The war in Korea ended on 27 July 1953, but it did not end in Vietnam. The policy of containment and legacy of U.S. involvement had been passed to President Dwight D. Eisenhower in January of 1953. At the time of his inauguration, the United States was carrying between one-third and one-half of the financial burden of the war in Vietnam (seventy-eight per cent according to the Pentagon Papers).

Eisenhower had won the presidency on a promise to end the war in Korea, and six months after his election he could claim fulfillment of this promise. His experience had taught him that the nation was tired of foreign wars. Although committed to the policy of containment of communist expansion, he strongly resisted the efforts of his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, and

¹⁶Kalb and Abel, Roots, p. 62.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 68.

his Vice President, Richard Nixon, to involve American soldiers in a shooting war in Vietnam. Even as the disaster at Dienbienphu loomed near, he refused direct U.S. involvement--at least until he could get congressional approval and support from our major European allies. Neither was forthcoming.

On 7 May 1954 Dienbienphu fell to the Viet Minh. The Geneva Conference and the establishment of the South East Asia Treaty Organization followed shortly thereafter. The latter was designed to prevent the former from assuring communist domination of all of Vietnam. SEATO became the link that tied U.S. involvement in Vietnam for the next twenty years.

Out of the ashes of Dienbienphu and the Geneva Conference rose leader Ngo Dinh Diem, a catholic anti-communist, seen by many as the George Washington of South Vietnam. On 1 January 1955 the U.S. Military and Advisory Group, MAAG, was formally established and the United States took over the training and equipping of the South Vietnamese Army from the French. In the South, Diem began a much needed program of governmental reform; while in Hanoi, thousands were executed to enforce "collectivism" under Ho Chi Minh. To all observers this was a case of the "good guys" in the South versus the "bad guys" in the North, a cause worthy of U.S. interest and support.¹⁸

In 1956 Chou En-lai visited Hanoi, John Foster Dulles visited Saigon, and the battle lines became more tightly drawn. It made sense to the Eisenhower administration to back Diem in

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 96-100.

his (our) fight against the communists: Viet Minh, Chinese and Soviet. In May 1957 Diem was awarded the Admiral Richard E. Byrd award for "inspired leadership in the cause of the free world," and in 1959 President Eisenhower declared in a speech at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania that Vietnam's future was vital to U.S. interests.¹⁹ Thus, the United States was becoming more and more of a partner in the conflict in Vietnam.

But the success of the "anti-communists" in South Vietnam was also observed by Ho, and resulted in a significant increase in his activities against the Diem regime. Diem reacted with repression and reprisal, which further alienated the rural peasantry and served to fuel Ho's propaganda fire. Paradoxically, Diem's initial success led to increased Vietcong activity, leading in turn to increased U.S. involvement.

In January 1961 President John F. Kennedy assumed office. Like Truman and Eisenhower before him, he was immediately faced with the problem in Vietnam. He, too, believed in the policy of containment. In his campaign against Nixon he had accused the Republicans under Eisenhower and Dulles of being soft on communism.²⁰ At his inauguration he told the world "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty."²¹

¹⁹Ibid., p. 105.

²⁰Podhoretz, In Vietnam, p. 50.

²¹Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961; cited in Podhoretz, In Vietnam, p. 50.

Early in 1962, Kennedy sent General Maxwell Taylor, his military advisor, to study the problem in Vietnam. The essence of Taylor's report was that the situation was "serious but not hopeless."²² Taylor and the Joint Chiefs recommended sending a large U.S. task force composed of U.S. combat troops, but the President rejected this recommendation. Instead, he increased the size of the military assistance mission: From 2,000 at the end of 1961, it rose to 15,500 by the end of 1963.

The President increased the number of combat support units, air combat and helicopter teams, and he significantly increased the number of Special Forces. By rejecting the option of large scale U.S. combat troop involvement, Kennedy hoped to achieve his goal of containment and avoid a U.S. land war in Asia. As Podhoretz put it, he wanted to win "on the cheap."²³

Kennedy, like Eisenhower before him, had been faced with the possibility of a number of collapses in Vietnam. To have accepted this would have been to abandon the long-standing U.S. policy of containment. Eisenhower had agreed with General Omar Bradley "... (it was) the wrong war, at the wrong time, and in the wrong place."²⁴ According to Podhoretz, Kennedy was acting prudently when he decided to go in slow and small. But as history would bear, "It was the wrong prudence, at the wrong

²²Podhoretz, In Vietnam, p. 54.

²³Ibid., p. 58.

²⁴Harry S. Truman, Memoirs, Vol. II: Years of Trial and Hope (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1956), cited by Podhoretz, in Why We Were In Vietnam, p. 29.

time and in the wrong place."²⁵

In November 1963 Diem was ousted in a military coupe and his family was murdered. Three weeks later Kennedy himself fell to an assassin's bullet. Thus, the burden of Vietnam passed to Lyndon B. Johnson.

Johnson had supported Kennedy's actions in Vietnam. Additionally, as a Vice President elevated to the Presidency by the laws of succession, he logically retained most of his predecessor's key advisors. Shortly after assuming office he signed National Security Action Memorandum 273 stating that "it remains the central objective of the United States in South Vietnam to assist the people and government of that country to win their contest against the externally directed and supported communist conspiracy."²⁶

Johnson, like those before him, wanted to avoid a U.S. land war in Vietnam. He had stated that he was not ready for American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys. With attacks on U.S. ships in the Tonkin Gulf, and the resultant Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964, he possessed what was tantamount to congressional authority to escalate U.S. involvement to whatever level he felt was required to win. But still he held back. Even his decision to initiate "Rolling Thunder" (code name for the bombing campaign directed against North Vietnam on a regular basis) was an attempt to preclude the need for a major commitment

²⁵Podhoretz, In Vietnam, p. 63.

²⁶Lyndon Baines Johnson, The Vantage Point (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 42.

of combat troops. Once again, it was an attempt to fight "on the cheap"--at the lowest possible cost to the United States.²⁷

"Rolling Thunder" did not succeed. In 1965 Secretary Robert McNamara returned from a fact-finding visit to Vietnam and reported to the President that the situation was grave and that the only way to "stave off defeat in the short run and offer a good chance of producing a favorable settlement in the longer run" was to commit another 100,000 troops immediately.²⁸ Podhoretz refers to this period as "the moment of truth" that both Kennedy and Johnson had tried to avoid.²⁹

Once again, the only options were to withdraw and lose, or to escalate. Accordingly, on 28 July 1965 President Johnson ordered 50,000 additional U.S. troops to Vietnam and announced that more would be sent as requested by General Westmoreland. The build-up would continue until over 500,000 American servicemen were committed to the effort.

Many historians feel that during the early months of his Presidency Johnson could have secured a declaration of war from the Congress of the United States, and they feel he rejected this plan for three major reasons. First, he felt that a negative reaction in world public opinion would surely be generated by the act of a large and powerful country (the United States) making a declaration of war on a small and underdeveloped

²⁷Podhoretz, In Vietnam, p. 74.

²⁸Johnson, Vantage Point, pp. 144-46; cited by Podhoretz, In Vietnam, p. 77.

²⁹Podhoretz, In Vietnam, p. 77.

country (North Vietnam, and that such an act could lead to greater Chinese or even Soviet involvement.

Secondly, because he severely underestimated the magnitude and power of the anti-war movement, Johnson felt he could accomplish his war objectives by falling back on his authority as President, without having to seek congressional support. Additionally, there was always the risk that Congress would not approve such a declaration. He further mistakenly perceived the anti-war issue as being fueled from debate over the tactical considerations of the Hawks versus the Doves (the how), rather than the philosophical consideration of our being involved at all (the why). Third, and most importantly, Johnson did not want to mobilize the nation and consequently be forced to finance the war by either increasing taxes or cutting back on the social programs he felt were his legacy to America, collectively known as his "great society."³⁰

As the anti-war movement continued to build, the very bombing that Johnson had begun as a means to win without stirring up the American people became the most exatatable issue of the debate. Johnson's failure to sense both the major issue and the scope of the anti-war movement, and his refusal to press the moral argument, allowed the war to lose it's legitimacy in the eyes of the American public.³¹ In time, the power of the anti-war movement and persuasion of many of his close advisors prevailed against

³⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

³¹ Ibid., p. 107.

President Johnson's resolve to win U.S. objectives in Vietnam. He began to explore, both publically and privately, the means to secure a negotiated settlement. All in all, during his administration there were sixteen bombing pauses and a total of seventy-two peace initiatives.³²

Thus, a new legacy was passed to President Richard Nixon in 1973--the legacy to get out of Vietnam. Unlike President Johnson, who had inherited an extremely difficult set of options--increase the effort or lose all we had invested in the future of Indochina--Nixon had only one alternative: Withdrawal. Like Eisenhower, Nixon had been elected on a promise to end a war; therefore, the only issue facing him was how to accomplish this with minimum cost in U.S. lives and prestige.

Nixon's plan was to continue the pressure, negotiate if at all possible, and rapidly turn the war over to the Vietnamese: It was called Vietnamization. As Henry Kissinger put it, "We were clearly on the way out of Vietnam by negotiation if possible, by unilateral withdrawal if necessary."³³ Although air, naval, artillery and logistical support for the South Vietnamese continued, American ground troops ceased all offensive operations after July 1971.³⁴ As the negotiations continued, President Nixon

³²Ibid., p. 110.

³³Henry A. Kissinger, White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979) p. 277; cited by Podhoretz, In Vietnam, p. 143.

³⁴Charles B. MacDonald, An Outline History of U.S. Policy Toward Vietnam, Report to the U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., 4 May 1978 (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 1978) p. 80.

directed a series of increases and decreases in bombing, mining and shelling aimed at strengthening our position to achieve peace under the most desirable terms. Through it all, the rhetoric of our unfailing support for a free South Vietnam continued.

An agreement was reached on 23 January 1973 and American forces began their final withdrawal. On 30 June 1973 the U.S. Congress passed an amendment to an appropriations bill prohibiting, as of 15 August 1973, the use of any funds "to finance directly or indirectly combat activities by United States military forces in or over or from off the shores of North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia."³⁵

The final invasions of South Vietnam by the North began in January 1975 and quickly turned into a rout. The last Americans were rescued by emergency evacuation helicopter on 30 April 1975, and General Duong Van Minh surrendered on the same day. Finally, after over twenty-five years, the war was over and we had lost.

³⁵Ibid., p. 92.

PART II

And so after more than two decades of effort, transcending five Presidential administrations, billions of dollars for war materials and over 50,000 American casualties, the United States finally abandoned its efforts to contain communist expansion in Vietnam. A single, precise explanation for why we failed to achieve our objectives, after so lengthy and monumental an effort, remains illusive.

Arnold's work shows that throughout the endeavor, there were logical rationales for the decisions that ultimately led to the United States' defeat. Additionally, each of the five administrations involved--adhering to the national policy of containment--made what appeared at the time to be the correct decision for avoiding a total loss on their personal watch. Each of their respective reactions to the crises of the moment--i.e., Truman's decision to support the French effort; Eisenhower's plan for direct aid to South Vietnam; Kennedy's decision to broaden the commitment and place more U.S. soldiers in country; and Johnson's "Rolling Thunder" and massive U.S. combat force build-up--were perhaps individually prudent, but taken "collectively" they proved disastrous in the final analysis.

Numerous volumes have been devoted to why the United States lost the war in Vietnam. Explanations run the gamut, offering reasons from political to strategic to tactical. Colonel

Harry G. Summers has postulated that the lion's share of the burden rests on the shoulders of the American military leadership in failing to provide adequate strategic direction for the war. Further enforcing this, he insinuates that our failure was not tactical: As a negotiator in Hanoi in 1975, he stated to his North Vietnamese counterpart "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield."³⁶ While Col Summers is ostensibly correct in his explanation of the strategic failing, it is necessary to look at this failing in light of the overall U.S. policy of containment and the limited war theory.

Limited war theory is defined as an alternative to total war or surrender, with one of its major objectives being the avoidance of superpower confrontation. It must be understood that national survival is not at stake; however, something of value to the advisory must be placed at risk in order to bring about negotiation. The basic strategy of limited war should be to FIGHT--SIGNAL--NEGOTIATE.³⁷

All of the statements above can be applied to U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Each administration was forced to fight: Facing either the option of surrender (abandoning U.S. support for South Vietnam) or employing limited escalation short of total war (expanding the war but avoiding superpower confrontation.)

³⁶Harry G. Summers, On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, 1981), p. 1.

³⁷Arthur E. Brown, "The Strategy of Limited War," in Military Strategy: Theory and Application, ed. by Arthur F. Lykke (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: USAWC. 1982), pp. 8-15.

As the escalations continued, the signals should have been clear. But counter to the theory of limited war, they were not followed by a willingness to negotiate. The signals were, in fact, wasted on an enemy who would accept nothing short of his total conquest of South Vietnam. This process of signaling as utilized in Vietnam demonstrates what is perhaps the biggest paradox associated with the policy of containment and limited war theory.

A paradox is defined by Webster as: "A statement that is self-contradictory in fact and, hence, false." For the United States to have taken actions of sufficient magnitude to cause North Vietnam to abandon their conquest and negotiate would have been to risk intervention by China, the Soviet Union or both. In effect, the risks would have become greater to the United States than to the enemy, and there-in lies a self-contradiction in limited war theory.

Colonel Harry Summers points out in his book, On Strategy, that the two major risks perceived by American leaders were of becoming engaged in a strategic nuclear exchange, possibly resulting in the destruction of the American homeland, and of becoming involved in an Asian land war with Communist China.³⁸ With this in mind, Col Summers further points out that America's leaders failed to heed the advice of General Stonewall Jackson, "Never take counsel of your fears."³⁹

³⁸ Summers, On Strategy, p. 33.

³⁹ LTG Thomas J. Jackson, CSA, 18 June 1862; Quoted in Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command, Vol I (New York: Scribners, 1942), p. 469; cited by Summers, On Strategy, p. 33.

As previously shown, fear of placing this country's future in jeopardy pervaded each of the four administrations, influencing their decisions and rendering them all unwilling to take a bold strategic military risk in Vietnam (e.g., invasion, bombing and mining of North Vietnam). Therefore, the only alternative in each case was a low risk, or piecemeal, escalation of the war effort. It was this piecemeal effort, itself a product of unwillingness to take sufficient risk, that was directly responsible for the protraction of the war.

Additionally, each of our Presidents knew that while the American public might endorse a policy of containment and be willing to support a limited effort to achieve this objective, they would not be willing to go to an all-out war based on the rationales used for justification of the Vietnam conflict as previously presented by Arnold. Surely none of the four Presidents wanted to be the one to press this issue to a decision. Thus, the restriction of national resolve, or lack thereof, also lead to a stalemate--and protracted involvement.

The fact that after time the patience of the American public gave out, culminating in the election of President Nixon on a ticket to get us out of Vietnam, demonstrates that protraction was not a viable concept to our democratic society. Therein, we come to another paradox in the limited war theory.

If we had acknowledged the conflict in Vietnam as a war from the outset and entered on a full-scale, "win-only" basis, accepting the risks, we could possibly have won in a short time, thus eliminating the aspect of protraction, and the issue of

national resolve would never have come up. However, national leaders felt that they could not risk expanding the war: They were not willing to risk Soviet or Chinese intervention, especially in light of the precedent set in the Korean Conflict by the Chinese "volunteer" force. So, in effect, we were "damned if we did and damned if we didn't."

In order to further demonstrate why protraction was disastrous in the case of the limited war in Vietnam and would most likely be so again in future American attempts at limited warfare, differences in socio-economic values of the publics involved must be taken into account. It is imperative to understand that national resolve differs greatly between democratic and totalitarian (communist) societies.

While the democratic (American) public has the freedom to form its own resolve regarding war efforts, and to publically demonstrate that resolve, even to the point of violence, such is not the luxury for the communist (Soviet/Chinese) masses. Their resolve is always reflected as that of the mother country and therefore can be maintained to a much higher degree over an indefinitely longer period of time than that of their democratic opposition.

Finally, it must be understood that in the eyes of the communist countries North Vietnam was not fighting a limited war, but rather one aimed at total conquest of their opponent. They were fighting an all-out effort against our limited one, and through the very fact of our unwillingness to risk superpower confrontation and possible world-wide escalation, they saw the means by which to defeat us.

There are two additional paradoxical problems inherent to the nature of the containment policy and limited war theory. Both were exposed by the Vietnam conflict and both affected the outcome, our defeat. The first is the danger associated with assisting a weak and/or corrupt government. Obviously, had the government of South Vietnam (or any country fighting a war of containment) been strong they would never have required U.S. backing and support to wage a war of containment. However, since the South Vietnamese government was both weak and corrupt, it was never able to obtain the full support (i.e., national resolve) of the total South Vietnamese population, thereby inadvertently casting the United States into a losing situation.

The final incongruity in the theory of limited war as exposed in Vietnam stems from the fact that there were no visible rewards to the average American citizen in return for his country's sacrifice. The public did not perceive success in "body counts," for that offered nothing tangible. Further, goals such as "Hamlet Pacification" did not equate to the traditional marks of success, e.g., George Patton's victorious roll across Germany and ultimate capture of Berlin.

In the mind of the man on the street, the North Vietnamese never posed a threat to his existence or his way of life; and although he may have supported the national policy of containment, in time the price simply became too high. The pursuit of this objective became the isolated policy of the "imperial Presidency" and not the will of the people.

It is likely that such will be the outcome in future protracted limited wars and it remains to be seen if the military leadership will be capable of devising a strategy that will be successful in light of this characteristic of our free democratic society. The essential question therefore appears to be: Can a successful strategy for fighting protracted, limited wars of containment exist within a democratic republic, or are the two concepts mutually exclusive? It would appear that the answer lies solely in the will and resolve of the people.

PART III

In light of the paradoxical aspects inherent to the policy of containment and limited war theory--illustrated by the United States being denied its objectives in Vietnam despite power, wisdom and enlightened leadership--several points emerge that are worthy of examination as lessons learned. First of these is the importance of total national resolve for the involvement. If full support is to be forthcoming, it can only be obtained through total candor with the American public on the motives, goals and possible risks associated with the involvement. It cannot be won through duplicity such as Arnold's research indicates existed throughout our twenty-five year involvement in Vietnam.

Events have also shown that without blatant affronts to the American citizenry, homeland and way of life, causing sufficient provocation to produce a conflict with tangible goals, objectives and measures of success--such as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor with the resultant atomic destruction of Hiroshima--it is nearly impossible to mobilize the public resolve to stay the course of a protracted war. Moreover, as Clausewitz points out, the unacceptable cost of war can--and did in the case of the Vietnam conflict--significantly influence a country's decision to cease fighting and seek peace.

Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine

the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.⁴⁰

A second lesson which should be gleaned from our experience in Vietnam and remembered well in future involvements is, very simply, we can lose. Vietnam proved, if nothing else, that America is not invincible, and that flag-waving does not deter an enemy unless it is backed up by force. But we cannot forcefully back up our flag if we are not willing to take the risk necessary to put the enemy in jeopardy and force him to negotiate.

Here, one must keep in mind how the differences in value systems described earlier affect the levels of risk we versus the enemy are prepared to face. It has been shown that we will not protract our effort without visible signs of victory; but since victory could mean a greater risk to the United States than to the enemy, the price has simply become too high and we cannot commit fully to the war effort. Hence we will not win, which in essence says we lose, and the circle has come full round.

A third lesson to be perceived is the need for a consistent strategy, one formulated at the outset of the conflict and maintained throughout the endeavor. Many authors have suggested that this was our biggest shortcoming throughout our prolonged involvement in Vietnam.

Not totally unlike strategy for conventional war, a strategy devised for a limited war must take into consideration the first two points discussed above: The risks involved and the

⁴⁰Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 92

will of the people. It is here, however, that the similarity ends. A strategy for limited war must avoid confrontation but achieve success expeditiously. It must have clear objectives that can be shown as accomplished in order to maintain national resolve, and it must show tangible results for the efforts put forth.

The communist enemy, however, perceives this limited involvement as a weakness. It demonstrates that the United States is unwilling to make a complete commitment and chance a confrontation. Since avoiding a confrontation is the essence of limited war theory--once again, the circle has come full round and we have lost.

Although America's most significant experience with a limited war proved disastrous, we can hardly adopt an isolationist policy in world politics and events simply to avoid another involvement. Hanson Baldwin has stated that "War is a human institution which is certain to remain as a global phenomenon."⁴¹ Colonel Arthur E. Brown, Jr. writes that "As the United States moves into the last quarter of the twentieth century, military power continues to be an essential element of national strength; the use of that power is essential if the country is to continue as a leading world power."⁴²

The statements made by these two students of U.S. military policy imply that future involvements of U.S. military forces in

⁴¹Hanson W. Baldwin, Strategy for Tomorrow (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p.1.

⁴²Brown, Military Strategy, p. 8-1.

limited conflict is, if not inevitable, at least highly probable. Given that be true, our leaders at all levels should take heed of the most significant lesson learned in our twenty plus years of involvement in Vietnam as pointed out by General Fred C. Weyand, the last commander of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam:

Vietnam was a reaffirmation of the peculiar relationship between the American Army and the American people. The American Army really is a people's Army in the sense that it belongs to the American people who take a jealous and proprietary interest in its involvement. When the Army is committed the American people are committed, when the American people lose their commitment it is futile to try to keep the Army committed. In the final analysis, the American Army is not so much an arm of the Executive Branch as it is an arm of the American people. The Army, therefore, cannot be committed lightly.⁴³

⁴³General Fred C. Weyand, Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, July 1976, cited in Summers, On Strategy, p. 7.

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