

Vietnam: The Rest of the Story

By Joseph Calderone



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As a veteran of the Vietnam War, I have searched over a period of years for answers as to why we were there, what we accomplished, what we could have accomplished, and whether what we did was justifiable. There continues to be much controversy among historians of the war. While orthodox American historians of the war have asked American-oriented questions seeking answers in documents produced by Americans, revisionist historians have included the Vietnamese side of the story and information obtained from North Vietnamese and Chinese archives. We are a long way from consensus about the purposes, conduct, and meaning of the war.

The historical debate over American involvement in Vietnam could be said to have begun even before the US Marines splashed ashore outside Da Nang in 1965, for in many ways, Graham Greene’s 1955 novel *The Quiet American* launched the intellectual discussion concerning the naiveté and questionable nature of American goals in Vietnam. That discussion was furthered and in some respects enflamed by the media attention the war got in the USA, in print and on television, which was often critical. Adding more fuel to the historical fire was the fact that American involvement in the conflict followed fast after the Second World War and was seen by

some as an attempt to reestablish colonialism in Vietnam.

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The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was formed after WW II as a mutual defense pact to halt the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. The signatories were the US, South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand. The domino theory that was supported both by Eisenhower and Kennedy held that the fall of South Vietnam to the communists would lead to the advance of communism to the other signatories. This was the reason for US intervention. The failure of the dominoes to fall beyond Indochina after South Vietnam went communist in 1975 suggests the theory was mistaken, but we cannot say what would have happened had South Vietnam gone communist a decade earlier than it did. Indonesia, for instance, was far more firmly anticommunist in 1975 than it had been in 1965. Thailand was much stronger, and the Chinese influence was much less threatening.

Ngo Dinh Diem was the leader of South Vietnam from 1954 to 1963. Because of his unparalleled reputation for competence and integrity, he was admired by his political rivals and sought as a

figurehead by the emperor Bao Dai to form his government without restrictions. He was also respected by the Japanese and Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh. A man deeply dedicated to the welfare of his country, Diem governed in an authoritarian way because he considered Western-style democracy inappropriate for a country that was fractious and dominated by an authoritarian culture. The Vietnamese masses of the mid-20th century were not, he believed, seeking a leader whose ideas appealed to them, but a strong and charismatic leader who would organize the people, protect them, and treat them justly.

The Diem regime's chief effort to put its ideological precepts into practice was the strategic hamlet program—an elaborate nation-building program designed to promote self-reliance, civic engagement, and group solidarity while providing security. American advisors, the American press, the South Vietnamese government, and, most importantly, the Vietnamese communists were in general agreement about the program's achievements. There was evidence that pacification and counter-insurgency principles were producing many more positive results than the conventional search and destroy methods espoused by General Westmoreland, and the communists were losing much of their support from the Vietnamese peasantry in the countryside. There was dramatic improvement in the security situation in 1962 and 1963. South Vietnam was holding its own during this period even in the face of massive infiltration of men and material from North Vietnam.

The deck may have been stacked against the South from the start, but three strategic decisions made by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson made it even more difficult for South Vietnam to maintain its independence.

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The first major error was allowing North Vietnam to use Laos as an infiltration route. In 1961, the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned President Kennedy that South Vietnam would be in a strategically untenable situation if the Communists were allowed to dominate southeastern Laos. Kennedy rejected their advice because he didn't want to risk becoming embroiled in a ground war in Laos. President Johnson tried to negate the ill effects of this decision through bombing, but he too failed to realize this could not be accomplished without troops on the ground. Consequentially the Allies failed to isolate the battlefield, a key principle of both conventional and counter-insurgency warfare.

The second strategic error of the pre-1965 era was Kennedy's decision to overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem. The resulting instability severely undermined the South's

efforts. Diem and his family were far from perfect, but they had held the state together. Diem refused, however, to be anyone's lackey, and his unwillingness to take instructions from the US Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, helped seal his ultimate fate. The sudden elimination of the Ngo Family apparatus opened up a Pandora's box of political intrigue that sent the government into a tailspin from which it nearly did not recover. As General Westmoreland observed, "None of our efforts had any chance of success in the periods during which the government was weak, divided, and thus ineffective" (qtd. in Wiest and Doidge 136). There were warnings that removing Diem would cause problems, but the anti-Diem cabal in the Kennedy administration ignored them, encouraging the coup without having a plan for the installation of a more effective replacement.

The coup did not lead to any of the major political reforms that Americans erroneously believed were indispensable for victory. In fact, there was a catastrophic collapse of the war effort after Diem's assassination in November 1963. South Vietnamese fortunes deteriorated badly in 1964 and 1965 due to the turmoil that descended over the government after Diem's death and the North's decision to exploit the turmoil by escalating the conflict. The fact that North Vietnamese policymakers specifically cited the opportunity created by Diem's death when they decided to escalate the war in 1963 supports this view. The thesis that the South Vietnamese Army was

holding its own during 1962 and 1963 is likewise bolstered by the Northern leaders' justifying their decision to shift to conventional warfare on the grounds that experience had shown that political agitation and guerrilla warfare were incapable of producing victory. The North's determination to prosecute the war almost regardless of cost was not a matter of conjecture.

A final strategic error occurred when President Johnson embraced the academic concepts of limited war and gradual escalation, concepts that ultimately proved bankrupt as war-fighting doctrine. Together with the decision to unseat Diem and to close neither North Vietnam's ports nor its access to the South via Laos, the United States had indeed gone far toward making the war unwinnable, but none of these decisions was inevitable. A different action on anyone of them might have altered the flow of historical events to produce a more favorable outcome for the allies. These truly were opportunities lost.

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American media presence had a dramatic effect on how the war proceeded. By 1965, there were over 400 accredited correspondents in South Vietnam, enjoying an unprecedented access to the battlefield of the war torn nation. Several young journalists, including David Halberstam of the *New York Times* and Neil Sheehan of the Associated Press, published stories of arguable veracity—at least they have been challenged by subsequent historians. They and other journalists and were openly

critical of American military tactics and of the South Vietnamese state. In 1965, Halberstam published his book *The Making of a Quagmire*, a sustained attack on American policy in Vietnam and especially on the regime of Diem. This book powerfully interacted with events on the American home front and helped lead to the questioning of the conflict among many of the nation's academics and intelligentsia. What would become the conventional view of the Vietnam War was established even before American soldiers entered combat in earnest.

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Perhaps of greater importance than their biased viewpoints regarding the Vietnam War was the interaction between reporting and the powerful imagery produced by modern cameras and broadcasting technology. Television made Vietnam what some have called

“the living room war,” its images arriving nightly in every American home. The combination of this reporting with the general societal turmoil that permeated the 1960s and 1970s helped shape the American perceptions of the Vietnam War. Academics and writers building on anti-war sentiment had a relatively easy task to develop the orthodox view that America's war in Vietnam had been a mistake and a tragedy.

Although the orthodoxy had been set, revisionist historians and writers kept up something of an academic rearguard action that conceived of the American war in Vietnam quite differently. Their dissent made little headway in the public sphere, but remains part of the discussion among historians. They characterized the conflict as necessary, the enemy as not simply Vietnamese nationalists but also committed communists, and the war as winnable. Although these historians conceded that the military had made mistakes in the prosecution in the war, the revisionist view saved its greatest criticism for the media, the politicians, and crumbling American morale on the home front.

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It was within these political, social, cultural, and military contexts that I served my thirteen-month tour in Vietnam. I arrived in Saigon, Vietnam in September 1969, the very month of Ho Chi Minh's natural death from heart failure at the age of 79. He was not initially replaced as President,

but a “collective leadership” composed of several ministers and military leaders took over known as the Politburo. General William Westmoreland had been removed from command in June 1968, and the U.S. strategy was still recovering from its “search and destroy” tactics and adjusting to the aftermath of the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive that had lasted from January to September 1968. Furthermore, the countercultural protests that began across European capitals in ’68 had spread to the U.S. By the time I arrived, the anti-war movement was gaining momentum and the arrest of eight Special Forces soldiers including the 5th Group Commander for murder of a suspected double agent provoked national and international outrage. Only one-third of Americans at this time believed that Vietnam was not a mistake.

President Richard M. Nixon was eight months into his first term as President when my tour began, and he had already inaugurated his policy of “Vietnamization” prior to my arrival. Vietnamization had two components. The first was to strengthen the South Vietnamese armed forces in numbers, equipment, leadership, and combat skills; the second was the extension of the pacification program that included military aid to civilians in South Vietnam. Vietnamization fit into the broader *détente* policy of the Nixon administration; the United States no longer regarded its fundamental strategy with regard to communism as George F. Kennan’s “containment” policy but as a cooperative world order in which Nixon and his chief advisor,

Henry Kissinger, were focused on the bigger world powers. During Vietnamization, Nixon opened new diplomatic policies with the Soviet Union and established high-level contact with China.

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Nixon’s invasion and bombing of Cambodia between 1969 and 1970 and the fatal shootings of four students at Kent State University led to more nationwide protests. On October 15, 1969, The Vietnam Moratorium attracted millions of anti-war protestors to Washington.

I rotated back from Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam to join my wife and children in Verona, Italy in October 1970.

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South Vietnam eventually rebounded from the post-Diem turmoil. In 1972, it was able to repulse a fourteen division North Vietnamese army offensive without American ground troops, another indication that North Vietnamese

victory was not predestined. South Vietnam might have been able to repeat this success in 1975 had the United States not slashed aid and withheld its air power.

Politically, however, it was too late. Although Henry Kissinger in 1973 negotiated an agreement in Paris that could have solidified the military achievements in 1972, the political world of Washington would have none of it. In 1973, the foreign minister of Vietnam visited Washington to consult on the next steps. No one in Congress would meet with him. From that point on the outcome was fated. The South Vietnamese army ran out of ammunition. Even so, the defeat inflicted by the South in 1972 was so severe that it took the North two years to be able to mount the 1975 invasion that brought the fall of Saigon.

In the January/February 2005 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Yale professor John Lewis Gaddis, regarded by many as the dean of diplomatic historians, observed: “Historians now acknowledge that American counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam were succeeding during the final years of the conflict.” In 1995 the deputy editor of Hanoi’s major daily acknowledged: “The anti-war movement was essential to our strategy. Visits to Hanoi by people like Jane Fonda gave us confidence that we should hold on in the face of battlefield reversals” (qtd. in Wiest and Doidge 105).

The monuments on the Washington Mall visually represent the nation’s history. The

Washington Monument stands for the revolution that formed this nation; the Lincoln Memorial for the Civil War that saved it; the Lee Mansion across the Potomac for the South's secession and its reincorporation. There seemed to be an unwritten rule that no foreign war however important should ever encroach on this domestic set of symbols.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial changed this. For America the war had been traumatic—a word in close accord with the dominant narrative that Vietnam had been a profound failure and a moral shame. But something else was sensed if unspoken as the memorial was designed and built: that Vietnam was and is a war that affected the national character and at the same time, that had been vital in defense of the international state system and world order. Along with the Civil War, Vietnam may take its place as the most consequential of all of America's wars.

If the ultimate goal of US intervention in Vietnam was to create a viable nation-state, with a capitalistic model, one possible line of revisionist argument could assert that the US won the war after all. Although Vietnam still remains a one party dictatorship, the heavy foreign investments during the French and US war years into Vietnam's infrastructure laid the foundation for an emergent nation of small shopkeepers and of industrious capital growth. Contemporary Vietnam is among the top exporters of rice and coffee. With the US lifting its trade embargo in 1994, economic opportunities

have created a growth culture of abundance. Additionally, Vietnam is privy to a rapidly growing increase in tourism—especially among US war veterans in the past two decades. Perceiving our pasts as inextricably linked to Vietnam, we return there for a variety of reasons. Especially illuminating was the comment of one veteran who returned to Vietnam in 2000; upon seeing Saigon's bustling local businesses, he remarked that the city was about as communist as New York.

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For my own attempt at closure, I returned to Vietnam four years ago. I arrived in Hanoi and found that the North Vietnamese were cordial but cold. I visited the Hanoi Hilton, where our prisoners of war were housed, and Ho Chi Minh's tomb, which is a replica of Lenin's tomb in Moscow. Naturally, there was a lot of propaganda about our atrocities but nothing about theirs. I arrived in South Vietnam the following day and stayed at a hotel on the beach in Nha Trang, where I had been stationed. The people were very friendly and gracious. The 8th Field Hospital, where I had served as chief of medicine, had been torn down, but the French army officer quarters where I had been billeted were still there, though boarded up. I also visited the underground tunnels at Cu Chi, sailed on the Mekong river, and visited a concentration camp where the South Vietnamese who collaborated with the Americans had been "reeducated."

South Vietnam is a beautiful

country with beautiful people who are hard working and industrious. I would not hesitate to return there.

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