

Chapter Ten

How Political Warfare Caused America to Snatch Defeat from the Jaws of Victory in Vietnam

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One of the many myths of the Vietnam War is that the President dragged the nation kicking-and-screaming into war against the will of Congress and without the support of the American people. I have already addressed the issue of congressional support for the initial commitment during the luncheon debate,¹ and you have just heard from Professor John Mueller, who is certainly among the nation's foremost authorities on public opinion and the Vietnam War. But the point is important enough to warrant further discussion.

SOME EARLY POLLS

The idea that the American people opposed the Vietnam War from the start is simply not true. On the contrary, the firm response to apparent Communist aggression in early August 1964 produced a thirty point increase in Lyndon Johnson's overall public approval rating.² (I'm not talking about a thirty percent increase, but a jump of thirty full percentage points—from forty-two percent in July to seventy-two percent in August—more than a fifty-eight percent increase in the President's favorable rating. I will defer to Professor Mueller, but I don't recall a comparable jump in any president's approval rating in such a short time period for any reason.)

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A Harris Poll taken in late August 1964 showed that seventy-two percent of the American people approved the President's handling of the Vietnam situation (up from fifty-eight percent the previous month).³ Professor Mueller notes in his landmark study that "support for the war in Vietnam rose very considerably as American troops joined the fighting during the last half of 1965." And by August of that year, polls were showing that supporters of the conflict outnumbered opponents by a margin of more than three-to-one.⁴

In November of 1965, when there were nearly two hundred thousand U.S. troops involved in a major war in Vietnam, the Gallup organization asked whether Americans would be more or less likely to vote for a congressional candidate who advocated "sending a great many more men to Vietnam." Of those expressing an opinion, sixty percent said they would be "more likely" to support such a candidate.⁵ Presumably, the other respondents ranged from those favoring an immediate or graduate withdrawal to those favoring continuation of the status quo.

In September 1966, another Gallup Poll asked a sampling of "prominent Americans" (selected from *Who's Who*) about Vietnam, and sixty percent of those expressing a preference favored escalation of the war.⁶

In retrospect, one of the big problems in interpreting polling data about Vietnam was the failure to distinguish between criticism of U.S. policy by "doves" who wanted the United States to withdraw, and the dissatisfaction of "hawks" who objected to what they perceived as a "no-win policy" and wanted a firmer military response. I counted myself in that latter group during the war, but we were greatly outnumbered on the lecture circuit and many who shared the same frustrations remained in what was accurately characterized as a "silent majority."

Perhaps the most remarkable illustration of this came when political scientists reported on their exit polls from the 1968 presidential elections in New Hampshire. As many of you will recall, Senator George McGovern came so close to defeating the incumbent President in the February primary that LBJ announced that he would not seek his party's nomination for a second full

term. I suspect that most others who followed the matter in the press, as I did, shared my assumption that we had grossly underestimated the strength of the “dovish” vote. It was not until years later that the truth emerged. Among their many other useful contributions to our understanding of the conflict in Vietnam, in their 1979 book, *The Irony of Vietnam*, Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts wrote:

By 1968 a five-to-three majority of the American public saw the original decision to go to war as a mistake, but simultaneously the number of those who wanted to end the war by escalating, even to the point of invading the DRV [North Vietnam], exceeded the number favoring complete withdrawal by a comparable margin. Support for the war, according to polls, exceeded confidence in the President’s handling of it, and that confidence was declining. This accounted for the astonishing and rarely recognized phenomenon that Eugene McCarthy’s total in New Hampshire contained three *hawkish* antiadministration votes for every two prowithdrawal votes; “of those who favored McCarthy before the Democratic Convention but who switched to some other candidate by November, a plurality had switched to *Wallace*.”⁷

You will recall that George Wallace was running on a third-party ticket with former Strategic Air Command four-star General Curtiss LeMay, who was perhaps best known on the Vietnam issue for suggesting that America bomb North Vietnam “back to the stone age.”

This is not to deny that there were substantial numbers of genuine “doves” as well, and as the war continued, the number of Americans who thought that the United States had made a mistake in becoming involved—and even that we were supporting the wrong side—increased year after year. By 1971, public opinion had shifted to the point that a majority of Americans were convinced that the war was “immoral.”⁸

One of the most pernicious myths attributed to the Vietnam War is that the American people will not accept American casualties; thus, we must limit our military doctrine to high-level bombing (as in Kosovo) or other tactics unlikely to result in American casualties. This is one of those seemingly intuitive conclusions that results from the reality that as American casualties in both Korea and Vietnam increased, public approval of the initial commitment declined. But, like the New Hampshire Democratic primary in 1968, a more sophisticated look at the data is warranted.

A 1995 study by the Rand Corporation, for example, notes that as public opinion turned against the Vietnam War between 1965 and late 1968, the number of Americans who favored withdrawal of U.S. forces held level at about nine percent. In contrast, the data shows that “as disapproval of the original commitment grew, so did the public’s desire to escalate the conflict to achieve victory.”⁹

More recently, an impressive study conducted under the auspices of the Triangle Institute for Security Studies (involving scholars from Duke University, the University of North Carolina, and North Carolina State) interviewed approximately five thousand military and civilian leaders and ordinary Americans. They concluded that “force protection” or casualty aversion is of far greater concern to the military leadership, slightly less concern to civilian leaders, and of significantly less concern to most Americans. Attributing this “myth” to both Vietnam and Somalia, the scholars indicate that had the Clinton administration responded to the killing of eighteen U.S. Rangers in Somalia in October 1993 not as a military disaster but as grounds to galvanize public opposition to warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid, “our research suggests that Americans would have tolerated an *expanded* effort to catch and punish him.”¹⁰

As in Vietnam, part of the problem is cowardice in Congress. Since Vietnam, members of Congress have been terrified of being held accountable for military operations that produce American casualties. Two Duke University professors involved in the Triangle study observed: “As news of the disastrous Ranger raid [in Somalia]—which left 18 American troops dead—came over the

airwaves, members of Congress rushed to the floor to demand that the mission be aborted.”¹¹

The real lesson to be drawn from the public opinion polls from Korea, Vietnam, Somalia, and numerous other military operations is quite different from the conventional wisdom of casualty avoidance. The Duke scholars write: “Collectively, these results suggest that a majority of the American people will accept combat deaths—*so long as the mission has the potential to be successful*. The public can distinguish between suffering defeat and suffering casualties.”¹²

UNDERSTANDING THE ANGER

One of the most difficult aspects of the Vietnam experience for today’s students to comprehend is the intensity of the emotions on both sides of the debate. America is a country steeped in a tradition of free speech and honorable dissent, and yet Vietnam was somehow different. It produced a level of anger unlike any other comparable event in my adult lifetime.

Let me illustrate what I am talking about by reading an excerpt from my old friend Nick Rowe’s book, *Five Years to Freedom*. Nick was a Special Forces officer captured by the Viet Cong in the Mekong Delta in 1963. Nick was a “pro,” and he deceived his captors into believing that he was an insignificant minion of no political or military value to them. It worked for awhile, but here is his description of how his cover was blown—when an “old man” came to his POW camp and announced: “I am a representative of the Central Committee, having come to this camp to say a few words to you.” Nick provided this account in *Five Years to Freedom*:

His voice was easily identifiable as one accustomed to command. “It is fortunate for us that the peace- and justice-loving friends of the South Vietnam Front for National Liberation in America have provided us with information which leads us to believe you have lied to us.”

My throat constricted. There was a violent wrenching in my stomach as the impact of his words slammed into me. He paused, watching me as I fought to keep my face immobile. The eyes of the guards . . . all seemed to be focusing and boring into mine. . . . He put on a pair of metal-framed glasses and began to read.

“According to what we know, you are not an Engineer. You are not assigned to the many universities which you have listed for us. You have much military training which you deny. The location of your family is known. You were an officer of the American Special Forces. Your father’s name is Lee and your mother’s name is Florence.” I felt myself cringing inwardly as my carefully constructed cover story came crashing down around me. The words became a blur of sound. He was picking me to pieces.

“Oh dear, God, I’m scared. God, I’m scared.” I fought to control the trembling of my bent knees, fought to mask the effect that piece of paper was having on me. He wasn’t guessing. He knew!

A few paragraphs later, Nick recalls his thoughts of that evening:

That night there was no word from the guard as he locked my leg irons and the cage door. I lay there, wishing I had someone to talk to, thinking back over the old man’s words. Who in the hell would give them the information on me? Where could they have gotten it by themselves? He had to be lying about someone at home sending the biographical data on me! An American wouldn’t do that to one of his own people. God only knew, it was tough enough being a POW without someone in the States dumping a load of crap like that on your head. Could anyone be misguided enough to actually help these VC? I thought about the reports I had

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heard over Radio Hanoi about the “peace- and justice-loving people of America” who were protesting the war.

I could understand opposition to a war and a strong desire for peace. There was nobody who wanted peace more than a soldier because it was his life that was sacrificed in war, his blood that was shed. There couldn't be a protester at home who matched a soldier's sincere desire for peace. Dissent was a part of American life, but to support the enemy at the expense of another American was inconceivable. There was no other place the VC could have gotten some of that information except from the United States and I suddenly felt very sick.¹³

To further illustrate the level of anger I am talking about, let me give you a more personal anecdote. It involves my late brother, who served his first tour in Vietnam as a Marine Sergeant at the height of the war in 1967-68. Around March or April of 1968, Ed's wife in Texas received a call from someone alleging to be with Western Union. They asked Dottie whether she wanted them to read the “urgent” telegram or to deliver it later in the day, and fearing the worst she asked that it be read. The caller began: “The Secretary of the Navy regrets to inform you that your husband, Marine Sergeant Edwin W. Turner, Jr., was killed in action while on a combat operation in the Republic of Vietnam” As I recall, they even had his correct serial number.

Perhaps you can imagine Dottie's reaction. It was predictable. One can even assume it was the anticipated response by the person who made the call—which was a total *hoax*. Can you imagine the kind of anger that would lead someone to want to inflict that kind of gratuitous emotional pain on a woman they didn't even know, simply because her husband was serving with the American military in Vietnam? This is one of the most difficult aspects of the Vietnam experience for young people today to comprehend.

THE FACTUAL PREDICATE: PERCEPTIONS OF EVIL

Most of the anger has subsided, and it is time to ask ourselves: Where did all of this anger come from? Why were American citizens burning down ROTC buildings, setting off pipe bombs, carrying the enemy's flag in protest marches, and even giving our enemies personal information on American citizens who had fallen into their hands and were being ruthlessly tortured? What led Jane Fonda to travel to North Vietnam, make radio broadcasts to U.S. servicemen telling them they were war criminals and should refuse to follow orders, and then pose to have her photograph taken sitting in a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun, with a big grin on her face, pretending to shoot down American aircraft?

I think the answer is clear. Most of the Vietnam critics¹⁴ were angry because of what they *knew* about Vietnam and about what the United States was doing in that small country. And in all fairness, their facts supported an angry response:

- They were angry because they knew that Ho Chi Minh was a great Vietnamese patriot, a nationalist who had led his country's struggle against French colonial exploitation and only wanted peace, freedom, and human rights for his people. Ho's fondness for the United States was such that he actually began his own 1945 Declaration of Independence by quoting Thomas Jefferson's 1776 language about all people being "created equal" and being endowed with "inalienable rights." In contrast, the war critics knew that the United States had first become involved in Vietnam in an unsuccessful effort to maintain the French colonialists in power, and we branded Ho Chi Minh as a "Communist" because he resisted our efforts to help our French allies.

- The critics were angry as well because they knew that Ho Chi Minh and his nationalist Viet Minh had won the First Indochina War at Dien Bien Phu and that the United States and other countries had agreed at the 1954 Geneva Conference to permit the reunification of divided Vietnam by free elections in

July of 1956—elections which even President Eisenhower had admitted would be won by Ho Chi Minh with at least eighty percent of the vote.

- The protesters were angry because they knew that the United States had imposed a corrupt and oppressive government headed by a former French “puppet,” Ngo Dinh Diem, to rule South Vietnam, and we had conspired with Diem to prevent the free elections guaranteed by the Geneva Conventions.

- When the oppressed people of South Vietnam formed a “National Liberation Front” in 1960 to struggle for their freedom, the American Government denounced them as “Communists” and tried to blame the entire struggle on North Vietnam.

- In August 1964, when it was clear that the people of South Vietnam were about to achieve their freedom, President Lyndon Johnson either fabricated or at least intentionally provoked a minor disturbance off the coast of North Vietnam and used Hanoi’s efforts to defend its coastline as an excuse to send hundreds of thousands of American soldiers to prop up the Diem dictatorship—in flagrant violation of International Law and of the power of Congress to decide upon war and peace.

I could go on and talk about the arrests of hundreds of thousands of “political prisoners” by the Saigon puppet regime and about locking people up in subterranean “tiger cages” for the offense of speaking out for “peace”—but my time is limited and I think I’ve captured the heart of the argument. The reason so many Americans were outraged at their Government and military in the 1960s was because they *knew* that the United States was on the wrong side—propping up a series of tyrants, blocking free elections, and dismissing a legitimate struggle for peace, human rights, and freedom with groundless allegations that the dissidents were “Communists.”

I was very active in the teach-in circuit and took part in more than one hundred Vietnam debates between 1964 and 1968 (when I first went to Vietnam). I did not doubt the sincerity of most of the critics, and I fully understood their anger. But I also knew something else: almost across the board, their arguments were factually *wrong*. And today that is even more clear, thanks to such things as the publication of the *Pentagon Papers*, the declassification of many other U.S. Government files, and perhaps, above all else, the very candid admissions by the leaders of Communist Vietnam about their role in deciding to “liberate” South Vietnam in May 1959, their creation of the so-called “National Liberation Front,” and their control of the war in South Vietnam from its inception.

REASSESSING THE “FACTS”

Time will not permit me to thoroughly refute each of the key arguments I have mentioned, but let me touch on at least a few of them:

- As for the idea that Ho Chi Minh was a benign “nationalist” who just wanted to remove the French from his country, the best sources by far are those published by Hanoi. Official Communist Party biographies acknowledge that Ho served as a co-founder of the French Communist Party in 1920 and spent three decades as a paid agent of the Communist International.¹⁵
- A popular theme was that Ho Chi Minh would have been an “Asian Tito,” serving as a buffer against Chinese expansion into Southeast Asia. In reality, Viet Minh radio had been denouncing Tito in the late 1940s as an American agent; and when Tito offered diplomatic recognition in January 1950, Hanoi refused to reciprocate. Even after Stalin’s death and Khrushchev’s visit to Belgrade to embrace Tito, North Vietnamese leaders continued to characterize Yugoslavia as a “Third World” country outside the “Socialist Camp”—and Tito’s “revisionism” was deemed the greatest threat to the solidarity of the International Communist Movement. Hanoi

endorsed the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1969, and the invasion of Afghanistan a decade later. The idea that Communist Vietnam would be a peaceful “buffer” to Communist expansionism is difficult to reconcile with the fact that Hanoi gave more than 1,600 M-16 rifles—left behind by the United States—to the Communist guerrillas in El Salvador to be shipped via Havana and Nicaragua.¹⁶

- Nor did the United States become involved in Vietnam to restore the French to power. On the contrary, the senior French commander complained in 1946 that the Americans were a greater impediment to their return than was the Viet Minh. (Ho Chi Minh, as you may recall, had formally “invited” the French to return and then joined forces with them to crush the anti-Communist VNQDD and other genuine nationalist groups.) The *Pentagon Papers* are quite good on the details of this period.

- Eisenhower’s famous quote about Ho winning an election had to do with a hypothetical election against the French puppet, Bao Dai, at the time of the fighting between France and the Viet Minh. Ngo Dinh Diem was, in fact, a highly respected and competent nationalist, who had refused to be a puppet for the French, the Japanese, or the Viet Minh—and he defeated Bao Dai by far more than eighty percent in 1955. By 1956, Hanoi had experienced a “land reform” bloodbath that had killed tens of thousands and quite likely hundreds of thousands of people—and the Party was so unpopular that Secretary General Truong Chinh was forced to engage in a public self-criticism and was demoted. The *Pentagon Papers* observed:

It is almost certain that by 1956 the proportion which might have voted for Ho—in a free election against Diem—would have been much smaller than eighty percent. Diem’s success in the South had been far greater than anyone could have foreseen, while the

North Vietnamese regime had been suffering from food scarcity, and low public morale stemming from inept imitation of Chinese Communism.¹⁷

But there is a more fundamental response to the “elections” myth. Neither the United States nor the State of Vietnam (which later became the Republic of Vietnam or “South Vietnam”) agreed to hold elections in July 1956, for the simple reason that the Communist delegations at Geneva had rejected their proposal that reunification elections be supervised by the United Nations to insure they were conducted freely. North Vietnam had a majority of the population, Ho Chi Minh never received below 99.9% of the votes in their “elections,” and, as the *New York Times* editorialized at the time, it would have been “monstrous” to settle the fate of South Vietnam through such a process.

- The issue of the “autonomous” NLF has already been touched on by others. Hanoi has admitted its paternity, and the evidence of that was very clear in the 1960s to anyone who bothered to do a little research. At the Third Party Congress in 1960, the Party passed a resolution calling for “our people in the South” to set up such a front, and the original Program of the NLF was in significant part a verbatim copy of the 1955 Program of the Fatherland Front in Hanoi. But few American war protesters had ever even heard of the Fatherland Front, and they could read the NLF demands for human rights and political freedoms—clearly not “Communist” issues. A decade before Hanoi confirmed its paternity of the NLF, I documented its role in detail in my history of *Vietnamese Communism*.¹⁸

- What about the alleged 202,000 political prisoners held in South Vietnam and the so-called “tiger cages?” Well, the total prison population in South Vietnam when this charge was made was about thirty-six thousand, of whom perhaps six thousand to seven thousand were “Communist criminals”—including terrorists, extortionists, and the like. There really

were “tiger cages” used to imprison people in South Vietnam—and you can see a drawing on page 317 of Nick Rowe’s *Five Years to Freedom*. Like other prisoners held by the Viet Cong in the Delta, he was shackled inside a small bamboo cage and left exposed to the Mekong’s notorious mosquitoes. The alleged “tiger cages” of Con Son Island, on the other hand, were above-ground concrete structures measuring roughly 5 by 10 feet, with a 10 foot ceiling. But that didn’t stop the *New York Times* and various critics in Congress from describing them as subterranean pits too small to stand up in.¹⁹

POLITICAL WARFARE

If not unique, the Vietnam War was at least unusual because of the importance played by political warfare in determining the final outcome. Indeed, it can credibly be argued that the outcome was determined less by military operations in Indochina than by misperceptions of the conflict in the United States and around the world and the resulting political crisis within the United States.

This point is illustrated by the famous epigram from my old friend Harry Summers’ book, *On Strategy*, where Harry spoke of an exchange he had with a North Vietnamese Colonel in April 1975:

“You know you never defeated us on the battlefield,” said the American colonel [Summers].

The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark a moment. “That may be so,” he replied, “but it is also irrelevant.”²⁰

I submit that both men were right. In the end, the United States was not defeated on the battlefield. On the contrary, while our adversaries proved to be remarkably able and resourceful combatants—and they pulled off many a successful ambush and prevailed in many tactical engagements—when they made the mistake of attempting a serious engagement of U.S. forces they

lost *every single time*. The North Vietnamese Army and so-called “Viet Cong” (which effectively ceased to exist as a fighting force after the Tet Offensive) not only did not win the war in a military sense, they did not win a single major battle.

But they did ultimately win the most important struggle—the battle to decide whether the United States had the political *will* to persevere in its efforts to prevent a Communist victory in Indochina. And it is worth noting that this was not a fluke, it was Hanoi’s “game plan” from the start.

Indeed, Hanoi’s reliance on “political warfare” was apparent enough that the *New York Times* observed as early as 1965 that “Communist hopes for victory . . . now turn more on an American withdrawal through exhaustion or in response to the pressure of public opinion rather than on conventional military success.”²¹ Three years later, Truong Chinh stressed in a lecture to Party cadres that “an important experience drawn from our revolution lies in that our people must come into close alliance with the . . . people of the imperialist powers which had invaded our country (France, Japan, the United States).”²² The history really goes back much further, to the effective use of political warfare by the Viet Minh, which Truong Chinh called for in *The Resistance Will Win*.²³ Theirs was a carefully thought out strategy, combining armed struggle with political and diplomatic struggle; and, despite our tremendous military capabilities, we were no match for them in the end in the arenas that mattered most.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT WENT WRONG

I completed my second Army Vietnam tour in late 1971 and two years later began a five-year stint as national security adviser to a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I spent a fair amount of time in Indochina between 1968 and 1975, visiting forty-two of South Vietnam’s forty-four provinces at least briefly as well as Laos and Cambodia. But in all honesty, I learned more about why we lost in Vietnam during my years working in the Senate than I did in Indochina.

John Norton Moore and I have often debated about which factor was most decisive in America's defeat in Vietnam, the incompetent mismanagement of the conflict by McNamara and Company, or the ignorance and partisanship of Congress. I think the answer is *both*—with the second factor being the direct cause of our loss, but at the same time itself being in part a product of the former.

But for all of our mistakes in how we fought the military side of the war, the reality was that a dramatic and very positive change occurred between 1968 and the signing of the Paris Accords in January 1973. I remember talking to Bill Colby a few months before his tragic death, during one of his annual visits to address our Vietnam seminar here at the Law School. He spoke of driving across the Mekong Delta unarmed, with John Paul Vann, a couple of years after the Tet Offensive, just to prove to themselves how much more secure the situation really was. And I drew exactly the same conclusions from my own travels throughout the Delta during that same period.

Admiral James Stockdale has written about the transformation he witnessed from a prison cell in the Hanoi Hilton during the December 1972 bombing of *Linebacker II*. Hanoi ran out of SAMs, the B-52s kept coming, and he could see the broken spirit in the eyes of every guard and North Vietnamese soldier he saw.

At dawn, the streets of Hanoi were absolutely silent. The usual patriotic wakeup music was missing, the familiar street sounds, the horns, all gone. [In prison,] our interrogators and guards would inquire about our needs solicitously. Unprecedented morning coffee was delivered to our cell blocks. One look at any Vietnamese officer's face . . . told the whole story. It telegraphed accommodation, hopelessness, remorse, fear. The shock was there; our enemy's will was broken.²⁴

The Paris Accords were seriously flawed, but Henry Kissinger believed the agreement could ensure the survival of a free South Vietnam with the combination of a carrot-and-stick approach. The

United States might be willing to help rebuild the North if Hanoi observed the Accords; and, if they didn't, we still had B-52s on Guam.

We will never know whether Kissinger was right or wrong. Because in May, Congress enacted a new law²⁵ that made it unlawful for the President to expend money in support of combat operations in the air, on the ground, or off the shores of North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia after August 15, 1973. In a very real sense, Congress "threw in the towel"—virtually snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong later remarked that the Americans would not come back "even if we offered them candy," and after Congress repeatedly cut military assistance to the Saigon regime, Hanoi responded by sending virtually its entire army to complete the conquest of its southern neighbor.

As I have already suggested, I believe this was one of the most shameful episodes of American history. I was there at the end, and it took me years to fully recover emotionally from that experience. After we withdrew, tens of thousands of South Vietnamese and more than a million Cambodians were executed. Tens of millions of others were consigned to a Stalinist tyranny—and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam remains among the world's "dirty dozen" human rights violators as we gather here. Back in the States, Americans resolved "never again"—we reached a consensus that there should be "no more Vietnams," but we didn't seriously endeavor to determine just what that meant. As a result, it has hampered effective U.S. policy in places as diverse as Angola, Central America, the Persian Gulf, and the former Yugoslavia.

LESSONS LEARNED

The theme of this conference is the "lessons" of Vietnam, and much of my remarks have been designed to show that some of the most popular "lessons" accepted by Americans are but myths. Genuine lessons are important, and I would be remiss if I did not conclude by suggesting some that I think are valid and important.

Others have referred to the “arrogance of power” in Vietnam; and the arrogance of many of the critics, who assumed that they had a monopoly on truth and righteousness, is worthy of note. I don’t question the sincerity of most of the critics. But in a similar way I also don’t question the sincerity of the physicians who allegedly bled George Washington to death thinking that would cure his health problems.

If there is one point on which we should all agree, it is that in our free society, critics of government policy ought to be allowed to speak their piece. But actions often have consequences, and the so-called “peace” movement clearly played a key role in persuading Congress to abandon the people of Indochina. It may have been great fun to take on the system, shut down the government, drive an American president from office, and end a war—but the protesters ought to be asking themselves whether the horror that followed for the people of Indochina was a logical consequence of their behavior. I believe it was.

I am speaking harshly of the protesters, even though had I believed the facts as many perceived them, I might well have been among their number. I submit that my own writings from the mid-1960s demonstrate that the facts were available to anyone who bothered to do a little homework. And I believe the critics should be asked to recognize the harm they did to the causes of world peace and human freedom.

There is more than enough blame to go around, and perhaps the most important lesson I would leave you with pertains not to the protesters but to the so-called “silent majority”—including not a few professors who knew the truth but simply didn’t want to get involved in the unpleasantness of an angry public debate.

The domestic debates over Vietnam were critical in the 1973 congressional decision to abandon Indochina. Had more people bothered to really try to understand what was going on and exhibited the courage to stand up and take on the arguments of the critics, the conflict in Vietnam might have ended differently. Many Americans seemed to assume that it was the “government’s responsibility” to defend U.S. policy in Vietnam. If nothing else, Vietnam confirms that democracy isn’t a spectator sport.

Shortly after I returned from my second tour in Vietnam, I had the good fortune to meet the late Professor Sidney Hook while we were both fellows at Stanford's Hoover Institution. Sidney used to talk about the importance of *courage* in addition to being a good scholar, and he was right. Vietnam affirms Edmund Burke's observations: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." I would only modify that by saying "good men and good women." Sadly, too many good men and good women elected to sit out the public debate, abandoning the field largely to misinformed scholars of the left and their angry disciples; so they, too, deserve some of the blame.

I began my remarks with a couple of anecdotes in an effort to explain the anger that characterized so much of the Vietnam debate. I shall close with another anecdote that illustrates what I see as perhaps the most important "lesson" we should learn from the struggle within the United States over policy towards Vietnam.

Last month I was invited to a luncheon here in Charlottesville by a group of admirers of our University's founder, Thomas Jefferson. As I'm sure all of you know, it is currently fashionable to assert that Thomas Jefferson fathered a number of children by his slave Sally Hemings. The luncheon was initiated by several admirers of Thomas Jefferson who were outraged at the politically-correct conclusions that were being drawn at Mr. Jefferson's expense from the DNA testing. They asked me and the other scholars who were present to serve on what has become a "scholars commission" to reexamine the evidence and its interpretation.

This is not the place to argue that issue, beyond noting that the DNA testing ruled out any possibility that Thomas Jefferson fathered the child who was the basis of the original 1802 allegation, that the testing did not even use Thomas Jefferson's DNA, and that the only slave child who was shown to have probably been fathered by someone with the male Jefferson Y-chromosome was born when Thomas Jefferson was well into his sixties and could have been sired by at least two-dozen other adult male Jeffersons in Virginia at the time. The most likely culprit in my view was Thomas Jefferson's mentally-challenged younger

brother, Randolph Jefferson—who was invited to visit Monticello about the time Sally Hemings became pregnant with her last child (Eston) and who was known to have a fondness for socializing with the Monticello slaves late at night²⁶—or perhaps one of Randolph's five sons.

Our luncheon included some very distinguished scholars, and privately most of them expressed shock at the way the DNA results were being interpreted. But taking on the forces of political correctness can be an unpleasant business, and one scholar after another explained that he could not find time in his schedule to become involved in trying to correct the record.

Ironically, one of the most courageous stands was taken not by a professor but by a businessman who came to the United States from Iran decades ago, had recognized Jefferson's influence on the global struggle for human freedom, and wanted to set the record straight out of respect for this great man. And in trying to explain how important Jefferson's influence has been, he observed that Ho Chi Minh had quoted the American Declaration of Independence in September 1945 and lamented that American ignorance of this had led to a senseless war in which nearly sixty thousand Americans had died. After all, he reasoned, if Ho Chi Minh was an admirer of Thomas Jefferson, there was certainly no reason for the United States to be at war with his country.

Why did this highly principled man believe that the Stalinist Ho Chi Minh was a closet Jeffersonian? Because that was what the critics said three decades ago—and, with very few exceptions, no one was willing to engage them and set the record straight. I had spent more than a decade of my life trying to educate Americans about the reality of Ho Chi Minh and his associates, and our failure was driven home vividly by hearing this very sincere, intelligent, and patriotic American repeat the canards of the anti-war movement. That mythology prevailed because too many good men and women were unwilling to endure the unpleasantness associated with challenging the angry critics. And our luncheon was establishing that a similar unwillingness to challenge the forces of political correctness in a different era would likely do

long-term harm to the reputation of the man who gave America its creed and one of its finest universities.

Candidly, I too had been thinking about excuses that I might use when my turn came to avoid this new controversy. Some of the advocates of Jefferson's paternity had already announced that anyone who disagreed with them was a "racist," and I still had scars more than three decades old from being branded a "war criminal" and "baby killer" because of my involvement in Vietnam. I was behind in my work and could think of a lot more enjoyable things to do than being branded a "racist"—but when I heard the reference to Ho Chi Minh, I realized that turning my back was not going to be an option. I eventually wound up agreeing to chair the commission.

So the first lesson I want to leave you with is that educated citizens in a free society have responsibilities beyond going to the polls every two years. To again quote Burke, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

There are many other "lessons" to be drawn from a reassessment of the domestic Vietnam debate:

- When you see thousands of angry protesters anxious to shut down government in the name of "peace" or "justice," do not equate their visible passion and apparent sincerity with wisdom or knowledge. On this point I have in mind particularly the recent protests we have seen in Seattle and Washington, D.C. against the World Trade Organization and World Bank. Many of the protesters no doubt take pride in the belief that they are the modern-day heirs to the legacy of the "Free Speech Movement" at Berkeley, the struggle against the Cambodian incursion at Kent State, and the Washington Moratorium March Against the War. If so, we should never forget that their predecessors in interest were misguided at best, and their protests undermined both peace and human freedom in Indochina. I love peace as only someone who has personally witnessed the true horrors of war can; but I can't recall the last "peace protest" that did not seem likely to undermine both that noble cause and the cause of human freedom and dignity as well.²⁷

- Congress is a political entity, and it is foolish to assume that a majority of members will willingly accept the risks inherent in standing firm against emerging public protests. If a “silent majority” again abandons the forum to radicals of any political persuasion, Congress can be expected to respond to the resulting noise.
- The Government lacks the capacity to take on hundreds of thousands of critics across the country on major public policy issues—and I suspect that is a good thing. I don’t want our Government to have a massive domestic propaganda agency. But it is not a good thing for the rest of us to sit idly by and assume that we don’t have a dog in the fight. Ultimately, the strength of a democracy is in its people, and the duties of citizenship go beyond casting ballots.

There are, no doubt, other “lessons” to be drawn from “the war at home.” In retrospect, I believe it may have been the most important “battlefield” of the war—and as we search for “lessons” from the tragedy we call “Vietnam,” it is imperative that we reassess these issues along with the more traditional military evaluations in trying to determine what went wrong.

The overwhelming majority of Vietnam combat veterans say they would willingly go again if asked. When you take millions of young men from the streets of America and send them half-way around the world, you are likely to deploy a certain number of individuals who would be rapists, murderers, or other social misfits wherever they were located. My Lai happened, and it was *worse* than most Americans believe. But it was an aberration, in strong contrast to the behavior of the overwhelming majority of American soldiers who served in Vietnam. Jug Burkett²⁸ deserves the esteem and gratitude of every American for his tremendous work in correcting the mythology surrounding Vietnam veterans.

More than fifty-eight thousand American servicemen did not return alive from Indochina. To them we owe a great debt. The war is over, our side lost, and there may be little we can do at this point to alter those realities. But we can endeavor to understand what

went wrong, and we can resolve to try to avoid repeating the same mistakes again to the detriment of a new generation of young men and women. We owe this to the memories of those who made the ultimate sacrifice in Vietnam and the futures of those who may be called to serve in the future. Perhaps we can do no more, but we should resolve to do no less.

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Notes

- ¹ See chap. 9.
- ² Leslie H. Gelb & Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1979), 212.
- ³ Cecil V. Crabb, Jr., *The Doctrines of American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 214.
- ⁴ John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973), 5, 54.
- ⁵ George Gallup, ed., 3 *The Gallup Poll* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1972), 1971.
- ⁶ *Id.* at 2025-26.
- ⁷ *The Irony of Vietnam* (emphasis in original), 172. The internal quotation is cited to Milton J. Rosenberg, Sidney Verba & Philip E. Converse, *Vietnam and the Silent Majority: The Dove's Guide* (1970), 49.
- ⁸ Gelb & Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, 226.
- ⁹ Research Reports, *Washington Quarterly* (Spring 1995): 154, reviewing Benjamin C. Schwarz, *Casualties, Public Opinion, and U.S. Military Intervention* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1995).
- ¹⁰ Peter D. Fever & Christopher Gelpi, "How Many Deaths Are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer," *Washington Post*, Outlook (Nov. 7, 1999): B3.
- ¹¹ *Id.*
- ¹² *Id.* (Emphasis in original.)
- ¹³ Major James N. Rowe, *Five Years to Freedom* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 399-402. Eleven years ago, Nick Rowe was murdered by Communist terrorists in the Philippines. See Keith B. Richburg, "U.S. Advisor Killed in Manila; Americans May Be Rebels' New Targets," *Washington Post* (April 22, 1989): at A1.
- ¹⁴ Presumably it is not necessary to emphasize that the violence and arguably treasonous behavior I have discussed was confined to a very tiny segment of the anti-war community, and the overwhelming majority of critics limited their protests to constitutionally-protected peaceful demonstrations and letter writing.
- ¹⁵ See generally, Robert F. Turner, *Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Development* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1975).
- ¹⁶ See Robert F. Turner, *Nicaragua v. United States: A Look at the Facts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 1987), 53-57.
- ¹⁷ Sen. Gravel, ed., 1 *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 246.
- ¹⁸ Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, chap. 9.
- ¹⁹ For a good discussion of the "tiger cages" issue, see Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 297-99. See also, Robert F. Turner, "Myths and Realities in the Vietnam Debate," in John Norton Moore, ed., *The Vietnam Debate: A Fresh Look at the Arguments* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 37, 48.
- ²⁰ Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 1.

²¹ *New York Times* (October 20, 1965).

²² Truong Chinh, *Forward Along the Path Charted by K. Marx* 85 (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1969).

²³ See, generally, John Norton Moore, ed., *Deception and Deterrence in "Wars of National Liberation," State-Sponsored Terrorism, and Other Forms of Secret Warfare* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1997).

²⁴ Jim & Sybil Stockdale, *In Love and War* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute Press, 1984), 432.

²⁵ *Pub. L.* 93-52, 87 *Stat.* 130 (1973).

²⁶ Rayford W. Logan, ed., *Memoirs of a Monticello Slave: As Dictated to Charles Campbell in the 1840s by Isaac, one of Thomas Jefferson's Slaves* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1951), 35. ("Old master's brother, Mass Randall, (Randolph) was a mighty simple man; used to come out among black people, play the fiddle & dance half the night: hadn't much more sense than Isaac.")

²⁷ To mention two examples, during the U.S.-Soviet negotiations on Intermediate Nuclear Forces, the streets of London and other European cities were filled with angry mobs demanding that their governments reject a NATO plan to deploy U.S. Pershing II and Ground Launched Cruise Missiles on European soil. This was very much in response to a Soviet "peace initiative," but fortunately it failed. Shortly thereafter, the Soviets agreed to the most comprehensive nuclear arms control agreement in history, which paved the way for a series of successful accords on strategic ballistic missiles and other weapons as well. More recently, protesters at UN Headquarters in New York decried the suffering of the women and children of Baghdad and demanded an end to the Security Council's embargo. What the protesters either didn't know or didn't care was that the suffering was all imposed by Saddam Hussein, who responded to the UN sanctions by rejecting the offer to allow Iraq to import food, medicine, and humanitarian supplies. Saddam essentially elected to play a game of "chicken"—calculating that the people of the United States and other countries would care more than he did about the resulting suffering of his people and would pressure their governments to end their efforts to prevent Saddam from obtaining the ability to deliver Weapons of Mass Destruction against his enemies. Given the fact that Saddam has in the past used WMDs against not only his foreign enemies but against his own citizens, the stakes in this struggle are serious. But American "peace activists" hear there are hungry children in Iraq and rush to the barricades.

²⁸ See chap. 11 and B.G. Burkett & Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History* (Dallas, TX: Verity Press, 1998).

**THE *REAL* LESSONS
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