

CHAPTER 2

Vietnam: Reflections and Lessons

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My assigned topic is the disastrous war in Vietnam: what lessons, if any, came out of that war and have we in fact learned those lessons?

The overall framework for this session is the Cold War in Asia, and it is fitting that my topic comes under that heading: the most salient characteristic of the U.S. engagement in Vietnam was that two U.S. administrations, the Lyndon Johnson and the Richard Nixon administrations, saw the initial Viet Cong insurgency and the later full scale military engagement with North Vietnamese forces as an integral part of the Cold War. A senior member of Lyndon Johnson's staff explained to me that the 17th parallel was an extension of the Potsdam agreement. We were committed to holding the line at that parallel just as we were committed to hold the line at the Elbe or at the border between Greece and Bulgaria.

Strangely, this conception appeared to entail the view not only that the war was an integral part of the Cold War, but that North Vietnam was an integral part of a monolithic and almost seamless Communist block. And this was even after the split between China and the Soviet Union had become visible to the outside world as both bitter and probably irreversible.

I doubt whether the North Vietnamese were much concerned with whether they were part of the Cold War or not. However willing and eager they were to receive material assistance from the Soviet Union, they were unlikely to think of themselves as any kind of satellite, or even as another Cuba. Their own relations with China were clearly incompatible with any thought of a Moscow-Beijing-Hanoi axis. Any interests they

had in Cambodia and other neighboring nations were surely interests of their own, not interests subordinate to the interests of Moscow. And they could only have shaken their heads in puzzlement if told that the 17th parallel created in the 1950s as a national boundary was in any way a spiritual descendant of the conference at Potsdam.

That the North Vietnamese construed the stakes and the issues altogether differently from the way the U.S. government construed them, especially in identifying the struggle in Vietnam with the Cold War, does not itself invalidate an American interpretation at the time that what was at stake at the 17th parallel was exactly what was at stake at the 38th parallel twenty years earlier. But it does raise the question whether the United States was obliged to see that connection and to respond accordingly. And it prompts the question whether, if indeed the 17th parallel acquired the symbolic status of the 38th parallel, it had already acquired that status at the time Indochina was divided in the 1950s or it had acquired that status as a consequence of the U.S. involvement—even as a result of the U.S. government's choice to construe the struggle in Vietnam as part of the Cold War.

The issue here is one of expectations and interpretations: whether the United States had to defend its honor, its reputation, and its commitments to allies around the world by defending South Vietnam at whatever cost is largely a matter of whether Germans and Greeks and South Koreans and Russians and Chinese perceive the struggle in that fashion. And if they did, that must be because the United States

government manifested and articulated that symbolism and that interpretation just as Ho Chi Minh articulated the struggle as a test whether a poor Asian socialist country could outlast a rich American capitalist in a test of military stamina. U.S. leaders called attention to themselves as responding to a Cold War challenge to a seamless boundary surrounding the Soviet bloc.

I belabor the issue because it is a key to the question whether the United States cultivated an unnecessary sense of commitment when it elected to construe the attempts to subvert and invade South Vietnam as part of the Moscow—inspired and Moscow—led Cold War. What “escalated” in Vietnam was not only the commitment of resources and the level of violence and the area of involvement; what escalated also were the stakes in the contest.

It is important to understand how the stakes can come to be raised so high. I perceive at least two mechanisms, mechanisms that work together. One is ‘justification’, the other is ‘deterrence’.

The involvement is justified on grounds that the conflict is not local but worldwide, that the U.S. must meet its commitments here or have its commitments doubted in other places, that as leader of the free world the U.S. has no choice, that this struggle has ramifications for the entire region through a domino process, and has ramifications as far away as Berlin, Greece, and Cuba. The deterrence dimension is the hope of making it clear to the other side that the U.S. commitment is so immense and so obligatory and so unavoidable that the United States has no choice but to stick to the end at whatever cost, the hope being that the other side will recognize the fruitlessness of trying to outlast the United States.

The Cold War is over, and maybe we needn’t worry about repeating mistakes that our Cold War thinking led us into. But I am not sure that our Cold War thinking was peculiar to the Cold War. It will almost always be the case when the United States, or an alliance led by the United States contemplates, or engages in, military action that the action contemplated or engaged in has to be justified; and the justification will almost certainly adduce

principles that transcend the concrete local issues. Exalting those principles and dedicating the nation to those principles will almost certainly enlarge the stakes in the game. And usually also, to persuade the opponent that the United States must act unless demands are met or must stay in the contest until some kind of victory is achieved, the United States will have to display and advertise that if it does not rise to the occasion here, other aggressors will be emboldened in other times and places, threatened nations will submit rather than count on American help, and any kind of new world order will lose its infrastructure.

This is a genuine dilemma. The need to find justification in broad principles rather than local interests is genuine and legitimate, and the importance of providing grounds for the belief that the United States and its allies cannot afford to back down should not be minimized. But these two needs are met only at great risk. I can only call attention to the dilemma, I cannot resolve it until I know whether the next occasion is going to be Panmunjom, the 17th parallel, Berlin, Cuba or the Persian Gulf.

A stunning feature of the war in Vietnam was the extraordinary stability of U.S.-Chinese and U.S.-Soviet relations during that entire war. I spent the spring of 1965 in London, reading editorials in *The London Times* and *The Financial Times* and talking with people in government. The most widespread objection to the bombing of North Vietnam was that the bombing so greatly raised the probability that Communist China would intervene; specifically it was almost universally argued that if American aircraft ever went north of Hanoi the Chinese would be impelled to intervene. But the United States regularly had military aircraft within 5 or 10 seconds’ flying time of the Chinese border, and I believe there were at least a hundred border crossings recorded in the newspapers, and never a sign that the Chinese would let themselves be provoked into an imprudent military intervention.

It was during that war that U.S. relations with China improved dramatically. And the fact that we were in a bitter and expensive war with a

Soviet ally that the Soviets were materially supporting seemed to have no influence on Soviet-American relations. The Soviets obliged by trying to present no embarrassing targets to American aircraft or naval vessels, and both sides were able to pretend that there was no Soviet personnel at North Vietnamese anti-aircraft sites.

In the aftermath of the Cuban crisis of 1962 the era of Soviet-American or Soviet-NATO crisis was simply over. The invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 temporarily postponed SALT negotiations, but the war in Vietnam did not keep them from resuming. The imperturbability of both China and the Soviet Union during this period is one of the period's most stunning features.

Similarly striking and significant, though not nearly so astonishing, is the role that nuclear weapons did not play. Remember that early in the Korean War the Prime Minister of Great Britain flew to Washington to beseech President Truman not to consider using nuclear weapons in Korea. Nobody had to importune Lyndon Johnson not to use such weapons in Vietnam. We had come a long way since 1953, when President Eisenhower approved a policy statement, "In the event of hostilities, the United States will consider nuclear weapons to be as available for use as other munitions." And in 1954, "such weapons must now be treated as in fact having become conventional." And in 1955, "in any combat where these things can be used on strictly military targets and for strictly military purposes, I see no reason why they shouldn't be used just exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else."

Ten years later, in September 1964, Lyndon Johnson said, "Make no mistake. There is no such thing as a conventional nuclear weapon. For nineteen peril-filled years no nation has loosed the atom against another. To do so now is a political decision of the highest order." I confess I do not believe that President Eisenhower really meant what he said, but surely by the 1960s almost nobody expected nuclear weapons to be pertinent unless the war escalated way beyond Vietnam.

It is indeed a tribute to how far nuclear expectations had traveled in that decade that hardly anybody remarked, during Vietnam, on the absence of debate about possible use of nuclear weapons. Of course, there may not have been targets that demanded nuclear attacks. But if nuclear weapons were, in Eisenhower's words, "as available for use as other munitions," we should have heard arguments or reports of arguments about targets, means of delivery, yields and burst elevations. No, they were simply not available.

Vietnam reminds us of how exceptionally difficult it can be to get out of a war that one would prefer not to continue. There may be very few points, if any, at which a government can turn around and get out, declaring victory (or defeat) but getting out. Is there any way to identify one of those rare moments? The late spring of 1968 may have been one. Right after the Tet offensive, Washington was full of people who had appeared enthusiasts of the war for several years who were discovering that they had really been against it since even before the Tet offensive. This was a wholly demoralizing setback, particularly to the aspirations and pretensions of military intelligence. It was an easy time to come out and say, "I told you so." Maybe it was unfortunate that it turned out to have been enough of a setback for the other side, too, so that nobody could take advantage of the occasion to develop a consensus and go to the President and say it was time to get out.

President Johnson indeed gave President Nixon an opportunity, and Nixon acted wrongly, not necessarily unwisely, but wrongly in the event. I think he recognized the opportunity; but he wanted to do the right thing, and the right thing meant nothing precipitous, nothing disgraceful, only getting out "with honor." That approach may be just as much of a quagmire as getting in in the first place. If you are flying in the clouds and running out of fuel and don't dare to descend for fear the clouds reach the ground, if you ever see an opening, dive! Probably when there is an opportunity to get out of a war one has to be grasp it promptly, as President Nixon did not.

The lesson that may need to be learned over and over, a lesson that possibly no one can ever apply, is the extraordinary difficulty of pulling out of a situation in which one has invested heavily. Whatever the reasons why the United States got into Vietnam, the ultimate reasons that we were there from late 1965 until the time we finally evacuated was that nobody could persuasively invent a graceful way of getting out. Lyndon Johnson came as close as one might to demonstrating a principle that I have quoted from Ernest May on a number of occasions. That is that "governments" never surrender the wars they fight. New governments have to come in to do the surrendering. Lyndon Johnson let a new government in, and it failed to take advantage.

I do not think the U.S. Government ever seriously studied the option of getting out of Vietnam. The reason I do not think so is not that I have not heard about plans but that I think planning for that kind of contingency is something that governments are almost constitutionally incapable of, probably all governments and not just governments like ours in the United States. To officially and seriously ask people during Vietnam to make plans to pull the rug out from under those who were over there fighting would be terribly risky—not only with respect to what leaks to the enemy, but what leaks to one's own people, and to one's political opponents. To acknowledge withdrawal as a responsible option to study plays into the hands of those who already want to get out and who want an admission in principle that it is a legitimate option, thereby giving them bargaining power.

For that reason, to talk about the need to set up a procedure in which you will always

examine that option is to ask the impossible. A leader cannot permit that. Any hint that such an option is being taken seriously could seriously demoralize the military officers responsible for conducting the war. Perhaps such studies can only be done unofficially. Somebody has to volunteer to go off and study the problems saying, "I know that my President could never acquiesce in my doing this at his request; I won't even ask him if he wants it done, because it would be unfair to require the President to give an answer, and his answer would have to be negative."

It occurs to me as I write this that I may incur disfavor somewhere by even hinting that the United States will ever again need to turn around and get out. But the difficulty of turning around and getting out should go into that calculation of risks that I mentioned earlier, the calculation whether to raise the stakes to justify the action and to create that credible commitment.

Khrushchev in 1960 said that democracies were too soft to fight in wars of national liberation. "Soft" is too simple a diagnosis, but I think a dozen years later we knew what he meant and grudgingly conceded he had a point. What we didn't know and what he didn't know was that the Soviet Union's kind of socialism and despotism could prove just as soft. He died before Afghanistan could show up his misplaced confidence.

And the Soviet Union didn't even have the Cold War to cement their commitment in Afghanistan or to justify it. Vietnam and its many post mortem analyses invite reexamination in the light of the Soviet fiasco in Afghanistan, but I am not the one to provide it.