



"[We] all had grave objections to major U.S. ground force deployments," the White House's McGeorge Bundy wrote to Lyndon Johnson in July 1965, but, as Communist victory loomed in Vietnam, "[we] . . . moved from the mission of base security to the mission of active combat."

Vietnam as the Past

Were our Presidents right or wrong in involving the United States in Vietnam? Did our leaders adopt the best strategy for fighting the war? Did Hanoi wage a "revolutionary" struggle? How important was the American antiwar movement? What are Vietnam's lessons, and nonlessons, for today's U.S. policy-makers—and America's allies? As more documentation becomes available 10 years after the Nixon administration's "peace with honor," American historians have begun to supply some new answers. Their findings often challenge old clichés. Here Richard Betts analyzes U.S. entry into the war; Douglas Pike looks at the Communists' side; and Harry Summers re-examines the conduct of the war by America's leaders.

MISADVENTURE REVISITED

by Richard K. Betts

Each November 22nd, representatives of the U.S. Army Special Forces—the Green Berets—join members of the Kennedy family at a memorial ceremony at President John F. Kennedy's grave. This joint tribute symbolizes the ambiguous legacy of the U.S. venture in Vietnam. Kennedy had personally championed the Green Berets as an elite vanguard combating Communist revolution and subversion in the Third World. But just four years after the President's assassination, his brothers Robert and Edward had moved into the vanguard of congressional opposition to this commitment.

Last autumn, there was an added irony; the Reagan administration had recently moved, as Kennedy did two decades ago, to re-emphasize the role of the Special Forces. The United States was once again speaking as if it would "pay any price, bear any burden" to oppose challenges to the free world.

To the extent that Ronald Reagan's assertive policy in El Salvador recalls the early period of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, it is useful to re-examine the White House assumptions, deliberations, and expectations of the 1960s. One finds lessons and nonlessons.

The U.S. commitment to South Vietnam was impelled by

the overarching post-1945 goal of "containing" Communist expansion, first in Europe, then, with the Korean War, in Asia.

In the case of Vietnam, a few critics in Washington and in academe quarreled with applying "containment" to a theater low in priority to the West. Indeed, scholar-diplomat George F. Kennan, the Soviet affairs specialist who had coined the term, was an early critic of the Johnson administration's involvement in Indochina. But not until late 1965, after Lyndon Baines Johnson started bombing North Vietnam and sent 184,000 troops to the South, did many in Congress, the press, the universities, or the politically sensitive public begin to doubt that South Vietnam was a vital testing ground in the global East-West struggle to keep the world safe for democracy.

By the time Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger gained the White House in 1969, the war had become a political fiasco; the whole notion of containment was under heavy attack. Disillusionment over Vietnam, Sino-American rapprochement, and high hopes for détente and arms control soon eroded the bipartisan constituency for maintaining a strong U.S. military presence overseas, even outside the Third World.*But the reaction proved more transient than the consensus that led to Vietnam. As the Soviets or their allies advanced in Angola, Ethiopia, and Yemen, as revolutionary Iran humiliated the United States, and as Soviet troops went into Afghanistan, assertiveness slowly became popular again.

The U.S. experience in Vietnam will not inevitably repeat itself elsewhere, despite all the recent hue and cry over Central America. But it is worth examining what circumstances, beliefs, and judgments make Presidents and their advisers in Washington decide that in certain cases they have only one choice, and that they are better off enduring high costs rather than backing off from further engagement.

The United States became gradually involved in Indochina after 1950. Even before the outbreak of the Korean War, Presi-

*In May 1971, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D.-Mont.) offered an amendment to a military draft bill that would have required the United States to withdraw one-half of its 300,000 troops in Europe as of December 31, 1971. After intense White House lobbying, the Senate defeated the amendment by a margin of 61-36.

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In early 1968, LBJ meets with top aides (left to right): McNamara, Wheeler, Defense Secretary-designate Clark Clifford, National Security Adviser Walt Rostow, White House staffer Tom Johnson, Press Secretary George Christian, the CIA's Richard Helms, and Rusk.

dent Harry S Truman began to take on the financial burden of the vain struggle by America's NATO ally, France, to defeat Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh, which was assisted by Communist China, America's foe in Korea. Dwight D. Eisenhower continued and increased that support, and committed the United States to the new regime in South Vietnam after French withdrawal. South Vietnam did not become a high U.S. priority until Kennedy's Presidency, and it did not become the highest overseas priority until the Johnson era.

The 1960s were, of course, a turning point, but not because Washington's goals changed. Ever since the Korean War, U.S. policy in Indochina had vacillated between contrary objectives—preventing a Communist takeover while avoiding American participation in a major war in Asia. Yet the contradiction between these two aims did not become acute until 1965. The efforts of Kennedy and Johnson differed in scale—the 1961 decision to increase the number of U.S. advisers (from 948 in November 1961 to 2,646 in January 1962) pales beside the 1965

decisions to bomb the North and to dispatch combat troops to the South. But in both cases, U.S. involvement grew dramatically in order to prevent imminent South Vietnamese collapse under Communist pressure and to shift momentum to the anti-Communist side. What was required to do this in 1961 was far less than what was required four years later.

All in all, Kennedy was less willing to disengage than later apologists suggested, and Johnson less deceptive about his goals and less anxious to escalate than later detractors believed. The notion that Kennedy intended to extricate the United States from South Vietnam after the 1964 U.S. election is belied by his actions right up to his death: a continuing build-up of aid and advisers, presidential reaffirmations* that would have been gratuitous if he were looking forward to withdrawal, and prior endorsement of the 1963 Saigon coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem. Johnson's campaign rhetoric against Barry Goldwater in 1964 exploited public fears of war, but he never suggested that defeat would be an acceptable alternative.† And, although Johnson ordered contingency planning for direct U.S. military action before November 1964, he continued to search for alternatives *after* the election.

Losing and Winning

Indeed, LBJ was a most reluctant warrior. Like his predecessor, he refused to accept any radical options proposed by subordinates that promised *victory*. Early in 1965, he authorized the bombing of North Vietnam, but only in limited, gradually increasing doses—not the quick and overwhelming effort sought by the Air Force. In July 1965, he ordered a build-up to 125,000 men in South Vietnam, despite the lack of promises of a long-term solution from Army leaders. In late 1965, Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara privately estimated that 600,000 U.S. troops (10 percent more than the highest level ever reached during the war) might be needed by 1967 and admitted that even that number “will not guarantee success.”

Once the air strikes against the North began, Johnson abste-

*E.g., on September 12, 1963: “In some ways I think the Vietnamese people and ourselves agree: we want the war to be won, the Communists to be contained, and the Americans to go home But we are not there to see a war lost, and we will follow the policy which I have indicated today of advancing those causes and issues which help win the war.”

†In Akron, Ohio, on October 21, 1964, Johnson stated: “[We] are not about to send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.” But Johnson added that “we are going to assist them [the South Vietnamese] against attack as we have” in the past and “[we] will not permit the independent nations of the East to be swallowed up by Communist conquest.”

miously expanded them (rejecting military protests that such gradualism vitiated their effect) in consonance with his civilian advisers' hopes that mounting pressure might induce Hanoi to negotiate on U.S. terms.

As U.S. troop strength grew, General William C. Westmoreland's ground operations in the South expanded too, and soon, after Hanoi's spectacular but costly 1968 Tet Offensive, their cumulative effect—even if blunt and wasteful—forced the Communists, both regulars and guerrillas, onto the defensive and rolled back many of their earlier gains. But, in most circumstances, guerrillas win as long as they do not lose, and government forces lose as long as they do not win. And Hanoi, with its sanctuaries at home and its bases and routes of reinforcement in Laos and Cambodia, could keep from “losing” indefinitely. Colonel Harry G. Summers ruefully described his encounter in 1973, during negotiations on American MIAs (Missing-in-Action) in Hanoi, with a North Vietnamese officer who, confronted with the assertion that the Communists had never beaten U.S. troops in a major battle, replied, “That is correct. It is also irrelevant.”

In March 1967, Westmoreland told LBJ and McNamara that unless his forces were allowed to cut off Hanoi's infiltration of men and supplies, the war could continue indefinitely. Later in the year, despite their public optimism, Westmoreland and General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the President that with current U.S. troop levels, the war would continue as an indecisive “meat-grinder”; with a reinforcement of 95,000, it could drag on for three years; and with one of 195,000 (to a total of 665,000), it could last two years. Yet Johnson authorized an increase of only 55,000.

A Quest for Compromise

Like JFK, LBJ chose a *limited* strategy. He chose to nibble the bullet rather than bite it. He feared provoking Chinese intervention and undertaking a full-scale war (or withdrawal) that could wreck his primary ambition: to build the Great Society.

Most important was his unwillingness to provoke a domestic political assault from either the Right (for “selling out” Vietnam) or the Left (for going too far militarily). In effect, he preferred to compromise on the battlefield and to suffer limited attacks at home from both ends of the political spectrum rather than face the full fury of either—although until the Tet Offensive, he feared the hawks more than the doves. A consensus-seeking, centrist political strategy drove the White House military policy. In this, too, Johnson's approach reflected that

A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

1954-1975

1954 Geneva Accords end Indochina War between French and Viet Minh, dividing Vietnam into North and South. Eisenhower offers aid to South Vietnamese government.

1955 U.S. advisers take over training of South Vietnamese army (ARVN) from French. Diem becomes leader of South Vietnam.

1958 Growth of Communist guerrilla war against Diem regime.

1959 Hanoi decides to unify Vietnam by force, organizes Ho Chi Minh Trail infiltration routes to South Vietnam.



Vo Nguyen Giap, Ho Chi Minh (1945)

1960 Hanoi forms southern National Liberation Front (Viet Cong). Kennedy elected President.

1961 As Viet Cong pressure grows, JFK increases aid to Saigon, raises number of U.S. military advisers from 685 to 16,000—by late 1963.



Ngo Dinh Diem (1955)

1962 Soviet-American agreement in Geneva provides for "neutral" Laos, but does not end Hanoi's use of Ho Chi Minh Trail or CIA counterinsurgency effort.

1963 After suppressing Buddhist dissidents, Diem is ousted and killed by army; Kennedy assassinated; Johnson becomes President. McNamara notes Viet Cong gains after anti-Diem coup.



John F. Kennedy (1962)

1964 Hanoi starts sending regular army (PAVN) units to South. United States pledges assistance to South Vietnam as required to defeat "Communist aggression"; issues warnings to Hanoi. After clash between North Vietnamese PT boats and U.S. destroyers, Congress passes Tonkin Gulf Resolution supporting U.S. efforts to "prevent further aggression." Johnson elected President, as his Great Society gets under way. 23,000 U.S. advisers are in Vietnam.

1965 Communists batter ARVN; U.S. planes start bombing North Vietnam; Marines land at Da Nang to protect air base; Nguyen Cao Ky becomes Premier of South Vietnam; LBJ announces build-up to 125,000 men but refuses to call up reserves; Hanoi rejects U.S. offers to negotiate.

1966 U.S. Senate hearings on war policy; many antiwar demonstrations; Cultural Revolution in China; the *New York Times* reports from Hanoi on civilian damage caused by U.S. air strikes. Cambodia's Norodom Sihanouk secretly allows Hanoi to use Sihanoukville (Kompong Som) as supply port. War of attrition grinds on in South Vietnam. Filipinos, Australians, New Zealanders, South Koreans send troops.

1967 Guam "summit": Westmoreland tells LBJ more decisive strategy is required to end the war, but LBJ does not respond. Johnson raises U.S. troop ceiling in South Vietnam to 525,000, calls for 10 percent surtax. Elections of Thieu and Ky. McNamara privately urges end of U.S. bombing and limit on U.S. manpower in Vietnam, resigns to become president of World Bank in 1968.

1968 LBJ curbs most direct U.S. investment abroad and restricts overseas travel of U.S. citizens to cut growing balance-of-payments deficit. North Korea seizes *Pueblo*, U.S. Navy "spy ship." In Vietnam, Giap's forces besiege Khe Sanh, launch countrywide Tet Offensive and, later, "mini-Tet" attacks against Saigon. Eugene McCarthy, peace candidate, wins 42.4 percent of Democratic vote in New Hampshire presidential primary; Johnson receives 49.5 percent. LBJ orders partial bombing halt and announces he will not run for re-election; Hanoi agrees to peace talks in Paris. Clifford fixes 549,500-man U.S. troop ceiling and gradual transfer of war burden to South Vietnamese. LBJ ends all bombing of North. Nixon elected President with 43.4 percent of popular vote.



Nguyen Van Thieu (1968)

1969 In "Vietnamization" effort, Nixon withdraws 68,000 troops during year; Ho Chi Minh dies; mass antiwar march in Washington. Peace talks continue.

1970 Joint U.S.-South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia after Lon Nol coup ousts Sihanouk. Four protesters at Ohio's Kent State University are slain by National Guardsmen; students close 100 colleges.

1971 South Vietnamese troops, with U.S. air support, invade southern Laos, in raid on Ho Chi Minh Trail. The *New York Times* begins publication of "Pentagon Papers." Re-election of Thieu. U.S. troop strength in Vietnam drops below 200,000. Congress votes to end draft in 1973.

1972 U.S. election year. Equipped by Soviets, North Vietnamese launch massive tank-led Easter Offensive; Nixon orders mining of North Vietnam's ports and renews bombing. He attends summits in Beijing, Moscow. Watergate break-in. Hanoi's offensive stalls. Kissinger says "peace is at hand," but year ends with peace agreement unsigned. Nixon re-elected President, orders all-out "Christmas bombing" of Hanoi area to force North Vietnam back to Paris conference table.

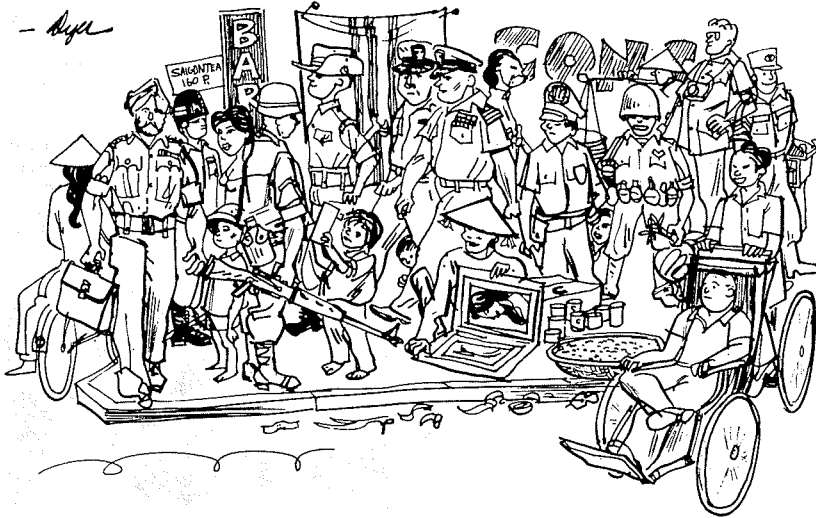


Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger (1970)

1973 Nixon halts all air operations against North Vietnam. After he privately assures Thieu that the United States will react with force to Communist violations, the United States, North and South Vietnam, and Viet Cong sign peace pact in Paris. In August, obeying Congress's mandate, United States ends bombing of Khmer Rouge insurgents in Cambodia, and thus all direct U.S. military intervention in Indochina. As Watergate disclosures engulf White House, Congress passes War Powers Act.

1974 Both sides violate cease-fire in South Vietnam. U.S. Senate and House cut back military aid to Saigon requested by Nixon. In August, climaxing Watergate scandal, Nixon resigns as President, and is succeeded by Gerald Ford.

1975 Communists triumph in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. North Vietnamese take Phuoc Long province against feeble resistance, then open Great Spring Offensive that routs South Vietnamese forces and ends with capture of Saigon. Americans help 150,000 escape. Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge capture Phnom Penh, begin massacres across Cambodia. Pro-Hanoi Pathet Lao forces occupy Vientiane, Laos's capital. Peace.



Saigon street scene (c. 1966) includes an Indian observer, an Australian soldier, U.S. Navy officers, a city cop, a newsman, an American GI.

of his predecessors.

Nixon also sought to follow a middle path between his own instincts (more hawkish than Johnson's) and the growing opposition in Congress and the broader public. He successfully appealed to the "Silent Majority"—who, polls indicated, wanted to withdraw but not to lose—by combining "re-escalations" (secretly bombing Communist bases in Cambodia in 1969, briefly invading Cambodia in 1970, supporting a short-lived Army of the Republic of Vietnam [ARVN] invasion into Laos in 1971, renewing the bombing of North Vietnam and mining Haiphong harbor in 1972) with peace talks, the phased withdrawal of U.S. troops, and "Vietnamization."

Actually, Nixon's approach was no less contradictory than that of his predecessors. Like Kissinger, Nixon overestimated his ability to solve the problem through the negotiations at Paris that Johnson had initiated in 1968. Nixon milked his "madman" theory—that the Communists would quail before the threat of his irrational behavior—but his hopes (like those of LBJ) of enlisting Moscow's aid to sway Hanoi did not materialize, and Nixon, not the enemy, made the crucial negotiating concession in May 1971 by implicitly accepting the presence of North Vietnamese troops in the South after a cease-fire.*

*Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years*, Little, Brown, 1979, p. 1,018.

Under Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, senior policy-makers in Washington were seldom deluded that the odds of routing the Communists in Vietnam were high. Indeed, in most cases, they increased U.S. deployments of men and/or firepower simply to stave off defeat, with no real expectation of victory. What made the men in Washington believe that they were making efforts that with luck might pan out, rather than marching *inevitably* toward defeat?

The Iron Combination

The answer lies between hubris and hope. During the early 1960s, both civilian and military theorists of "counterinsurgency" promoted the fateful illusion that American tutelage could reshape the fragile, war-battered South Vietnamese political system, creating a new nationalism among the South Vietnamese that could confront Marxist revolutionary élan with some sort of vigorous Asian Jeffersonianism—through land reform, free elections, better government.

Some U.S. "pacification" techniques proved successful—in the short term. For all their much-publicized deficiencies, the sheer weight of allied manpower and economic resources produced major gains in rural prosperity, population control, and road security during the years between Tet and the 1972 Easter Offensive. Increasingly unable to enlist new recruits, the southern Communist guerrillas (Viet Cong) were ground down by attrition; North Vietnamese forces took over the chief burden of combat. Large-scale *conventional* North Vietnamese attacks, with bases in Laos and Cambodia, rather than Viet Cong guerrilla insurgency, brought on the 1975 collapse of the Saigon regime.

Even more important was limited war theory,* an outgrowth of opposition to the Eisenhower administration's post-Korea "massive retaliation" policy. The focus was on using measured doses of force to induce an adversary to negotiate and to compromise. The 1965–67 air war against North Vietnam exposed the holes in some versions of the theory. The Pentagon civilians who had designed the air war originally expected to "calibrate" the U.S. response to each enemy provocation and to use incremental pressure to convince Hanoi to desist. This aim was inevitably subverted by practical difficulties—targeting, timing, communications—that derailed Washington's "orches-

*Its chief academic proponents were Robert Osgood and Thomas Schelling; their views found many echoes in the Army, notably in writings by Generals Maxwell Taylor (*The Uncertain Trumpet*, 1959) and James Gavin (*War and Peace in the Space Age*, 1959).

tration" of words and deeds.

Most of all, the theory foundered because its proponents vastly underestimated Hanoi's determination and overestimated the basis for a negotiated compromise. The Vietnam War was primarily a civil war, and, overall, a struggle involving *incompatible* ideologies and visions of society, not just a proxy conflict between great powers over influence in a third area. Both American leaders and their critics in Congress and the press found this reality hard to understand. As Kissinger reflected with hindsight,

Because the United States had become great by assimilating men and women of different beliefs, we had developed an ethic of tolerance; having had little experience with unbridgeable schisms, our mode of settling conflicts was to seek a solution somewhere between the contending positions. But to the Vietnamese this meant that we were not serious about what we put forward and that we treated them as frivolous. They had not fought for forty years to achieve a compromise.

Professional military men never agreed with the civilians' game-theory logic. Yet, with few exceptions, until 1968 both military and civilian leaders in Washington assumed that South Vietnam *had* to be saved. The United States could not just walk out on its ally. The disputes, seldom publicized, were over means, not ends.

Only if President Johnson, McNamara, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk had known for *sure* in early 1965 that "graduated pressure" would fail and that the most pessimistic military estimates of what would be required to bend Hanoi's will were correct would there have been a chance for a White House decision to disengage. Like Kennedy, Johnson distrusted the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Some of his civilian lieutenants viewed bleak JCS estimates or pleas for "decisive" strategies as "worst-case" ploys designed to maximize their options and to protect their reputations in case of failure.

This tragic misjudgment aside, the fact remains that LBJ & Co. knew that gradually building up U.S. strength in Vietnam offered no assurance of victory. Yet at each juncture until Tet 1968, they saw no alternative to pressing on, *hoping* that the Politburo in Hanoi would grow weary and negotiate.

The air war strategy was flawed, but the details of its rationale fade in significance beside the overarching White House decision in 1965 to keep the war effort, as a whole, limited. Ex-

cept for the military, who did not protest in public, there were virtually no officials in the executive branch—and few newspaper editors or legislators—who in 1965 questioned the premise of limitation.

The tragedy stemmed from the iron combination of this consensus with the premise that the war still had to be fought.

The one high-ranking official who opposed escalation was Under Secretary of State George W. Ball. Beginning in 1963, he argued that Vietnam was of secondary importance, and that our commitment there drained resources away from NATO. LBJ's negative reaction was ironic, since the initial U.S. involvement in Indochina was spurred by the priority of NATO—to support France in the early 1950s even though Washington had no love for colonialism. But not until 1965, after the first Marines went ashore at Da Nang in March, did Ball recommend outright withdrawal.

In 1964–65, Congress was quite complaisant; only Senate mavericks like Wayne L. Morse (D.-Ore.) and Ernest H. Gruening (D.-Alaska) opposed crucial decisions of the mid-1960s. When J. W. Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, turned against the war in 1966, he was still countered by colleagues of equal rank such as John C. Stennis, chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

There was little early active support for Johnson administration policy on Capitol Hill, but, contrary to myth, even well after Tet, nearly all congressional war foes, from Edward M. Kennedy (D.-Mass.) to George S. McGovern (D.-S.D.) issued calls for faster troop withdrawals and greater concessions in peace talks, *not* for unconditional U.S. withdrawal. Though opposition on Capitol Hill mounted with time, it was not until *after* U.S. troops had been withdrawn and the POWs returned in 1973 that the raft of legislation was passed constraining both presidential war powers and aid to the South Vietnamese ally.

Running Out of Time

In short, the remarkable American consensus behind the initial intervention, from 1961 to the 1968 Tet Offensive, has been obscured in retrospect by the force of later disillusionment. Only *after* it became clear that the cost of prolonged U.S. intervention in Vietnam was prohibitive did it begin to seem to large segments of Congress, the media, and academe that the alternative, a Communist victory in South Vietnam, was not so grave a disaster (for America). But by that time, compromises that had seemed radical during the Johnson administration seemed in-

THE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT, THE NEW LEFT, AND PUBLIC OPINION

On March 31, 1968, President Lyndon Baines Johnson announced on TV that he would not seek re-election. "With America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home," he could not both serve as the nation's wartime Commander-in-Chief and fight the partisan battles of a political campaign.

The growing antiwar movement claimed credit for Johnson's decision. But did its efforts hasten the war's end? Probably not.

Mild dissent first surfaced in 1964–65. A few prominent intellectuals, notably Hans J. Morgenthau, argued that the Free World's interests in South Vietnam did not justify a massive expenditure of U.S. blood and treasure. Said columnist Walter Lippmann in July 1965, "We can search the globe and look in vain for true and active supporters of our policy." Liberal doves—Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Richard H. Rovere, the *New York Times's* John Oakes—variously called for bombing halts, cease-fires, and talks leading to a coalition regime in Saigon that would include the southern National Liberation Front (Viet Cong), which, some of these writers suggested, enjoyed autonomy from Hanoi.

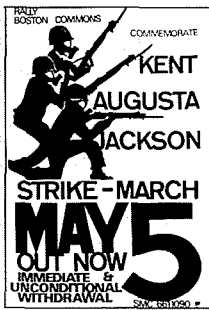
New Left intellectuals demanded much more. Besides condemning LBJ, the U.S. military, and South Vietnamese leaders, they cheered on Ho Chi Minh. Visiting Hanoi in 1968, the *New York Review of Books's* Susan Sontag discovered "an ethical society" whose government "loves the people." Her hosts' only defect was that they "aren't good enough haters"; Hanoi's jailers "genuinely care about the welfare of the hundreds of captured American pilots. . . ." No less impressed was novelist Mary McCarthy, who concluded that Prime Minister Pham Van Dong presided over "a moral, ascetic government, concerned above all with the *quality* of Vietnamese life." And MIT's Noam Chomsky described his own country as "the most aggressive power in the world"; he urged "a kind of denazification" of U.S. leaders.

More widespread was a larger movement centered at first in the elite universities. As higher draft calls came in 1966–67, such groups as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) conducted "teach-ins" on college campuses and then mounted protest rallies in cities across the nation. Against such opposition, Lyndon Johnson's failure to offer "a convincing moral justification" for the U.S. war effort, *Commentary's* Norman Podhoretz argued in 1982, doomed his quest for stronger support at home.

Yet through most of the 1960s, nearly two-thirds of the public, judging by polls, favored a continuation or intensification of the struggle. The Vietnam War, political scientist John E. Mueller has shown, only became more unpopular (in September 1969) than the Korean War after U.S. casualties in Vietnam had substantially surpassed those of the earlier, shorter conflict (see charts, pp. 112–113).

Moreover, Mueller argues, the protesters' disruptive style was in some ways self-defeating. In a 1968 poll by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research in which the public was asked to rate various groups on a 100-point scale, one-third gave antiwar protesters a zero, while only 16 percent put them anywhere in the upper half of the scale.

The dramatic efforts of antiwar Democrats to elect presidential peace candidates gained only Pyrrhic victories. The surprising 42.2 percent vote that Senator Eugene J. McCarthy won in the party's 1968 New Hampshire primary largely reflected "anti-Johnson" rather than "antiwar" sentiment. Among McCarthy voters, hawks outnumbered doves by nearly three to two. Moreover, the Democratic Left, Mueller contends, "helped to elect Richard Nixon twice": in 1968, by convincing a sufficient number of disaffected liberals to sit out the election and give Nixon a narrow victory over Hubert H. Humphrey, and in 1972, by securing the Democratic nomination for a landslide loser, Senator George S. McGovern.



The antiwar movement crested in 1969–70, as moderate Democrats, notably Humphrey and Edmund S. Muskie, came out against what was now Richard Nixon's war. But when the last great Washington protest march occurred in April 1971, the heteroge-

neous antiwar coalition was already fragmenting into a number of single-issue groups, notably feminists, environmentalists, homosexuals. And as draft calls dwindled with Nixon's gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam, campus unrest noticeably subsided.

The Vietnam conflict did not cause the "cultural revolution" of the late 1960s in America (and Western Europe). "If there had been no Vietnam War, we would have invented one," Yippie leader Jerry Rubin wrote in 1970. Rather, the war came to represent all that dissident groups believed was wrong with the United States: It offered, in Sontag's words, "the key to a systematic criticism of America."

In the end, as Mueller suggests, antiwar protest (and congressional outcries) inhibited administration policy-makers, but it was not decisive. It may have prompted Nixon to speed up U.S. troop withdrawals, to pull back from his 1970 incursion into Cambodia earlier than planned, and to join Democrats in ending the draft. It did not prevent him from bombing the North in 1972. Congress adopted the most consequential antiwar measure, the restrictive War Powers Act of 1973, well after street protest had faded.

Still, most scholars agree, the disarray of the Vietnam era brought one long-term consequence: It helped to shatter the U.S. foreign policy consensus forged during the early Cold War, greatly complicating the task of later Presidents in defending U.S. interests abroad.

sufficient. As Kissinger recounts:

By August of 1969 we had offered or undertaken unilaterally all of the terms of the 1968 *dove* plank of the Democrats (which had been defeated in Chicago). We had exceeded the promises of the Republican platform, expecting by our demonstration of flexibility to foster moderation in Hanoi and unity at home. We were naively wrong in both expectations.

The American effort in 1965–72 was not subverted by moral objections (such objections remained those of a minority even to the end), but by a gradually building public perception that all the blood and treasure was simply being *wasted* to no visible end. The United States may be able to fight a major limited war again, say, in the Persian Gulf, but only if it is not long and inconclusive. As Harvard's Samuel P. Huntington observed: "The most crucial limitation . . . is not the limitation on weapons or geographical scope or goals, but rather the limitation on *time*."

Wide recognition of such U.S. political realities reinforces the military's argument against limitations on the use of conventional forces. But this recognition provides no guarantee against future mistakes. The necessary scale and duration of successful military operations can never be known for sure in advance. What the Vietnam record shows is that Washington's top decision-makers knew in 1964–65 that, given the limits they imposed on U.S. strategy, victory would not come quickly, if it came at all. A similar prognosis by the White House in a future case, with the Vietnam experience in mind, could produce a presidential choice between a decisive hard-hitting use of force or no military intervention at all.

Hindsight Is Easier

Should future U.S. ventures overseas be undertaken only if a cut-off point is decided in advance? Political scientist Richard Neustadt has criticized the White House National Security Council staff in 1964–65 for not seriously addressing "the option of getting out of Vietnam It was always taken to be unacceptable on the face of it." Doing this, however, is politically dangerous; any leak to the press about such a study would surely subvert the commitment's support and credibility.

White House decisions on what is vital to U.S. interests abroad are affected by limited information and by official perceptions that may not be known to be—or may not *be*—incor-

rect until later. For example, as Rusk was wont to explain, part of the rationale for sending U.S. troops to South Vietnam was to prevent Chinese advances further into Southeast Asia. The problem was not simply an obtuse U.S. failure to recognize the Sino-Soviet split. Despite their dispute, Moscow and Beijing were seen in Washington as having parallel interests in promoting violent Communist revolution. Because a Sino-American rapprochement occurred during the 1970s does not mean that it could have happened during the 1960s—before the 1969 Soviet-Chinese border clashes and before Soviet hints of a future preventive attack on China's new nuclear facilities pushed Beijing toward accommodation with Washington.

A Yearning in Washington

Moreover, the President does not act in a vacuum. Had North Korea, armed by the Soviets, not attacked South Korea in 1950 (shaking Washington into revision of judgments about whether Communist leaders would resort to armed conquest), Truman might have felt no urge to become more involved in support of the French in Indochina. Had Eisenhower not just concluded the Korean War and scored anti-Communist successes in Iran and Guatemala, he might not have felt secure enough in 1954 to accept the partition of Vietnam (though his acceptance resulted in a U.S. commitment to the new regime in the South). Had Kennedy not experienced the unsettling Vienna summit with Nikita Khrushchev, the Bay of Pigs, a new Berlin crisis, and setbacks in Laos—all in 1961—he might have felt he had more leeway in avoiding a major increase in the U.S. advisory effort in South Vietnam later that year.

The crucial phase of any overseas commitment is the formative period, when presidential rhetoric becomes mortgaged and initial costs are sunk. Yet during this early phase, the long-range consequences are least certain and the commitment is a secondary matter, rather than the centerpiece it may become later as U.S. involvement and costs accumulate. When costs are still limited, the alternative seems bleaker than when the commitment burgeons into full-blown national sacrifice.

John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and lesser policymakers during the 1960s faced these pressures and ambiguities and decided that a gamble in South Vietnam was preferable to the alternative; uncertain prospects of victory were better than certain prospects of defeat. The results make clear the folly of this judgment.

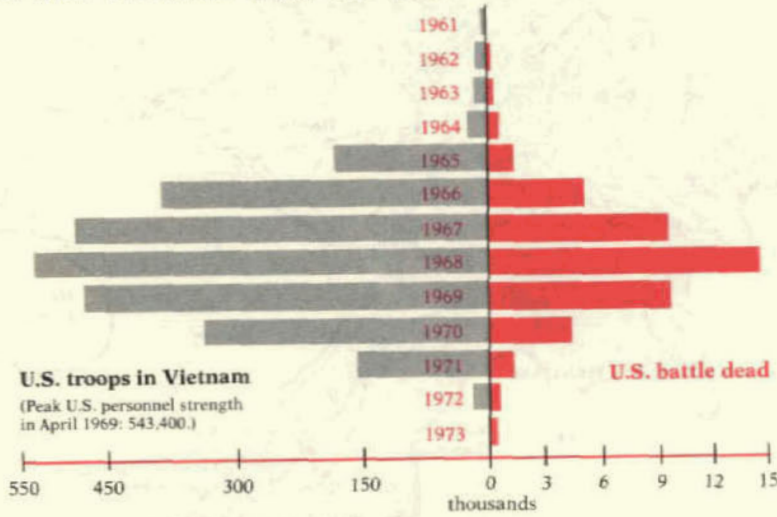
By 1975, the dominant "lesson" was that Washington

should take no risks, that it should not begin messy involvements in the Third World if there is *any* danger that they cannot be concluded without considerable sacrifice. Despite President Jimmy Carter's creation of a much-publicized Rapid Deployment Force in 1979–80, the lesson still has a powerful hold. In 1983, Congress has shown little enthusiasm for the Reagan administration's modest efforts to counter Marxist guerrillas in Central America, and none at all for direct combat involvement of U.S. military men, even as advisers. Yet "containment," in theory at least, has been reinvigorated. Reagan's rhetoric recalls the staunchness of the New Frontier. The Pentagon speaks of a global "maritime strategy."

What has not rebounded to the same degree is the bipartisan consensus among politicians and in the press behind containment. If anything, there seems to be a yearning in Reagan's Washington for the containment of the Eisenhower years, to bestride the globe and confront Soviet power without spilling blood, to be strong but at peace, to support anti-Communist allies or clients with money and arms but not men, all without raising the spectre of war.

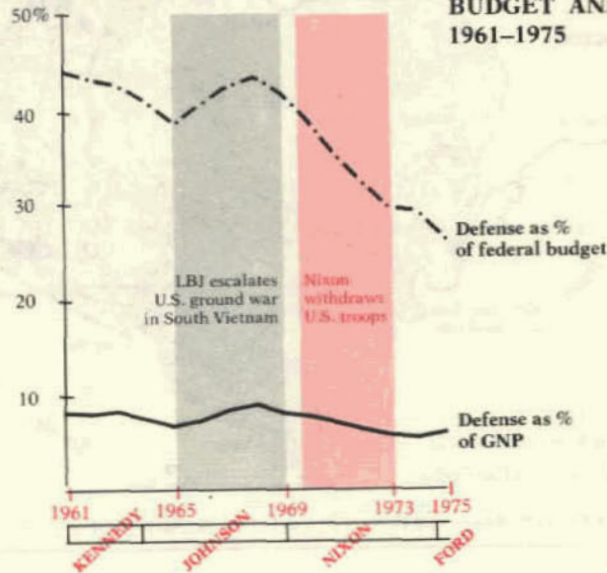
Dwight Eisenhower could accomplish all that because the predicament that his successors faced—imminent collapse of the whole row of Indochina dominoes—did not develop while he was in office. We know more now, but we still do not know how a disastrous war could have been avoided except at the price foreseen in 1961 as in 1965—apparently disastrous defeat. John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson were wrong in moving into Vietnam on so grand a scale, but neither was wrong in thinking that his failure to do so could produce unpleasant reactions at home and abroad. Now, as then, neither containment nor disengagement is risk-free.

YEAR-END U.S. TROOP STRENGTH AND BATTLE DEAD IN THE VIETNAM WAR, 1961-1973

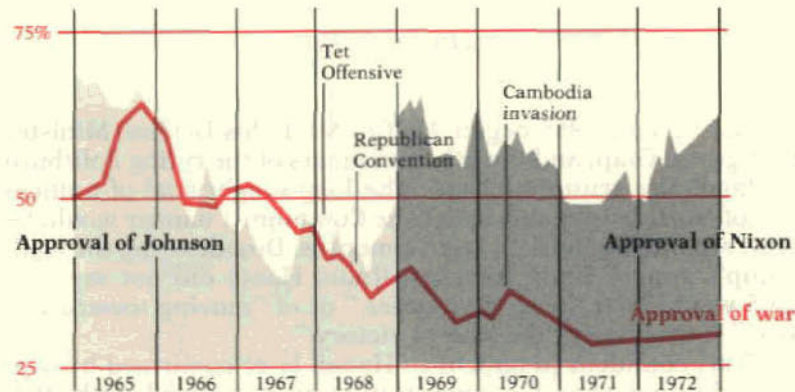


57,717 U.S. servicemen had died by the end of 1973: 47,268 in battle, 10,449 from other causes. Defense spending as a percentage of both the U.S. budget and Gross National Product declined long before the war ended.

DEFENSE SPENDING AS A PERCENTAGE OF FEDERAL BUDGET AND GNP 1961-1975

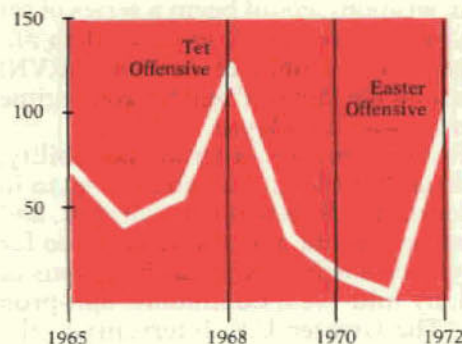


POPULAR SUPPORT FOR VIETNAM WAR AND TWO PRESIDENTS

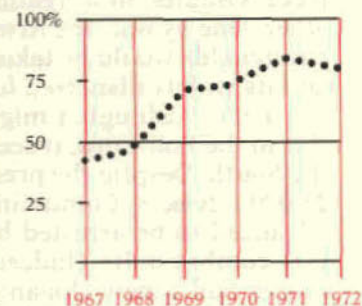


The Gallup poll questions (above) were: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way (the incumbent President) is handling his job?" and "Do you think the United States made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?" Answers to the "mistake" question do not indicate policy preferences, e.g., escalation or withdrawal. Americans reacted similarly to the Korean War (See WQ, Summer '78). Ironically, the erosion of U.S. popular support coincided with a long decline in enemy battalion-size (400- to 500-man) attacks after the 1968 Tet Offensive. After Tet, the percentage of South Vietnamese in relatively "secure" areas, as measured by (uncertain) U.S. statistics, rose steadily until 1972, when Hanoi launched its Easter Offensive.

COMMUNIST BATTALION-SIZE ATTACKS, 1965-1972



PERCENT OF SOUTH VIETNAM'S POPULATION IN 'SECURE' AREAS, 1967-1972



Source: U.S. Department of Defense; *The Budget of the U.S. Government*, 1970 and 1977, Government Printing Office; John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, 1978; *Journal of Defense Research*, Series B, Fall 1975.