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Vietnam's Legacy

America Knows Defeat But if It Had Won The War, What Then?

Some Historians, Politicians Speculate About a World That Might Have Been

'No Carter and No Reagan'

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We could have held South Vietnam. But what would that have done to America? Eugene McCarthy

The whole world would be different if the outcome in Vietnam had been different. Richard Holbrooke

WASHINGTON—Defeat, like the names of the dead on the black granite slabs of the Vietnam Memorial here, is carved into the national consciousness. For the dead and their mourners, as for the nation, defeat is an inescapable fact.

But what if the U.S. had won? Then the world—and American society—would surely be different. But in what ways? That is a question The Wall Street Journal put to historians, politicians and policy makers of the Vietnam era. Their replies, although often in conflict, do suggest certain conclusions. Victory wouldn't necessarily have strengthened the U.S. position in Asia. Paradoxically, that position may be stronger after defeat than it would have been after victory. Nor would victory likely have impressed a watchful Europe with U.S. "resolve"—the word that so obsessed official Washington during the long Vietnam struggle. Europe largely regarded resolve in Vietnam as a mistake.

"Vietnam had tremendous effects. But the least of them was on foreign policy," concludes Harvard historian Ernest May.

It is at home, not abroad, that victory would have mattered most profoundly. Victory would have left Americans with a different conception of themselves. The results, for better or for worse, would have touched national life, and certainly politics.

"Without Vietnam, there would have been no Carter, no Reagan," says Henry Kissinger.

The former secretary of state, reflecting in his Manhattan office, reasons that the Vietnam debacle—and the period of U.S. drift and Soviet assertiveness that followed—so frustrated voters that they turned to candidates outside the establishment.

His analysis draws agreement from an unlikely source: former Sen. Eugene McCarthy, who in 1968 rallied millions against the war. "Vietnam probably elected three presidents," including Richard Nixon, he says.

'The Defining Event'

But the effects of defeat went well beyond presidential politics. This, at least, is the view of author John Wheeler, a Vietnam veteran who wrote a book called "Touched with Fire." He calls the war "the defining event" for the Baby Boom generation—60 million strong and now asserting itself at every level of society. For many in that generation—protester, draft dodger or veteran—the war remains "a thousand degrees hot," he says.

Vietnam-era passions—and the activism that swayed institutions—boiled over into continuing crusades, ranging from women's liberation to the environmental movement, Mr. Wheeler argues. And if the U.S. had won? "That passion probably would have spent itself about 1973." As it is, he says, defeat "corked it up" and forced it inward—where its effects may be far greater.

The paths history might have taken aren't knowable, of course. The reality is that Vietnam cost the U.S. 58,014 military dead, 303,000 wounded, and a half-trillion dollars. South Vietnam ceased to exist as a nation. Cambodia (where perhaps 1.2 million people have died since the U.S.-supported war ended) became a Vietnamese satellite, as did Laos. Some of the "dominoes" that so concerned U.S. policy makers during the war—Thailand and Indonesia, for example—didn't fall.

A Winnable War?

Was Vietnam ever winnable? Those interviewed differ emphatically on that question. "This was a war that could never be won," says Richard Holbrooke, a former assistant secretary of state. But former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger sounds equally certain that "indeed, we *had* won, in all probability"—until war-weariness and Watergate undermined U.S. support for South Vietnam. Nor is there agreement on the definition of "victory."

Yet for all their differences these men do offer provocative speculation on a world that might have been. If the U.S. had won:

—Washington would be more inclined to wage limited wars in the shadows of the main U.S.-Soviet rivalry. The idea of limited war is alien to the American character, Mr. Kissinger says. Americans will support a quick war, and America will support an "apocalyptic" war between good and evil. But Vietnam was neither. The Nixon administration continued the limited war it inherited while looking for a face-saving way out. "It required us to emphasize the national interest rather than abstract principles," says Mr. Kissinger. Defeat there makes U.S. policy makers more hesitant to use force for limited purposes.

"What President Nixon and I tried to do was unnatural," Mr. Kissinger says, a little bitterly. "And that is why we didn't make it."

—U.S.-China relations wouldn't be as close. Withdrawal seemed to smooth the way for one of the signal U.S. foreign-policy accomplishments of recent decades, the normalization of relations with China.

Robert Komer, who ran President Johnson's Vietnam pacification advisory program—recalls a 1980 visit to China with then-Defense Secretary Harold Brown. Chinese-Vietnamese friendship had deteriorated into mutual distrust and a 1979 border war. At a reception, the abrupt, colorful Mr. Komer startled his Chinese hosts with some undiplomatic questions: Why had China supported Vietnam so vigorously against America? "What were you drinking then?" he asked.

The question was met with embarrassed giggles, he says. The conclusion Mr. Komer draws is that the U.S., while in Vietnam, stood in the way of history. With U.S. withdrawal, he says, "much larger forces reasserted themselves."

—Institutions of all kinds would have been less buffeted by a crisis of public confidence that swept the nation during and after the war.

"When the government loses a war for the first time in the history of the country, respect for government is bound to decline," says James Sundquist, a political scientist, and Brookings Institution senior fellow. Vietnam wasn't the sole cause—Watergate, racial tensions, persistent inflation all contributed—and government wasn't the sole victim. Between 1965 and 1979, "all institutions went down together" in the public-opinion polls, he notes. But government was a major victim. Some officials of the time remember it with pain.

J. William Fulbright is 79 now. Two decades ago, as Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman, he sponsored President Johnson's Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, only to turn sharply against the war later. He sits at his desk in a prestigious Washington law firm, reluctantly dredging up old memories. "I've tried to forget it," he bursts out at one point. Later he adds: "You come into those offices believing that your government tells the truth. I regret my naivete."

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