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WHAT ARE THE LESSONS OF VIETNAM?

When the helicopter rose in flight from the roof of the doomed U.S. embassy in Saigon a decade ago, Americans hoped they had finally left Vietnam behind them. For years afterward there was a widespread effort in the United States to put the Indochina experience out of mind. In the late 1970s, Mike Mansfield, the professor of Far Eastern studies who became U.S. Senate majority leader and then ambassador to Japan, told an English radio audience:

It seems to me the American people want to forget Vietnam and not even remember that it happened. But the cost was 55,000 dead, 303,000 wounded, \$150 billion. With some of us it will never be forgotten because it was one of the most tragic, if not *the* most tragic, episodes in American history. It was unnecessary, uncalled for, it wasn't tied to our security or a vital interest. It was just a misadventure in a part of the world which we should have kept our nose out of.¹

Today the desire to forget Vietnam seems to have given way to a desire to learn about it—specifically to learn how to avoid getting involved in such disastrous misadventures again. The last decade has witnessed not merely a resurgence of interest in America's Indochina experience as such but also in the possible parallels that can be drawn to it in Central America, the Middle East and elsewhere. Increasingly one hears appeals to the lessons of Indochina—generally if inaccurately referred to as the lessons of Vietnam—in support of or in opposition to current foreign policy initiatives around the world. Thus, Senator Gary Hart, when he charged in the 1984 presidential primary campaign that former Vice President Mondale misunderstood the crisis in Central America, claimed that "At the heart of the difference is, perhaps, the lesson of Vietnam . . . Mr. Mondale . . . has not learned the lesson of Vietnam." In reply, Mondale said that "Hart has learned the wrong lesson from Vietnam."

There are certain undisputed practical lessons that can be drawn from the long history of American involvement in Indochina's affairs, but most of these are of an operational character—those relating to the techniques and technologies of warfare—and as such lie outside the realm of this article. We propose to direct our attention solely to the question of whether or not the Indochina experience can provide lessons about where and in what circumstances America ought to intervene militarily in foreign conflicts.

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A difficulty that arises at the very outset is that the answers depend on what actually happened, but accounts differ on just that. Did the American government really know, for example, what it was doing in Indochina? Did it have the knowledge and the accurate information that was needed in order to make the right decisions?

In 1983, the knowledgeable George E. Reedy, once press secretary to President Lyndon Johnson, blamed the ignorance of Americans, from the President on down, for the errors that were committed in Indochina. In 1983 too, Senator Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) drew a parallel between Indochina and Central America: "The painful truth is that many of our highest officials know as little about Central America in 1983 as we knew about Indochina in 1963." The lesson is that both government officials and private citizens should in future be better informed about world affairs. Good advice; a worthy New Year's resolution. But are we likely to carry it into effect? How many of us at this moment are studying the situation in Baluchistan or some other likely flashpoint of crisis?

In any event it is by no means universally conceded that we did not know what we were doing. Barbara Tuchman is among

those who do not agree that we lacked the knowledge to make the right decisions in Indochina. In her much-discussed recent book, *The March of Folly*, she claims that "ignorance was not a factor in the American endeavor in Vietnam." Instead, she concludes that American policy in that country was a principal illustration of governmental folly. By folly, Mrs. Tuchman means irrationality: the pursuit of policies that run contrary to self-interest by people who knew they were doing so. She writes that in Vietnam, "All the conditions and reasons precluding a successful outcome were recognized or foreseen" by American officials who willfully refused to draw conclusions or to act upon the basis of what they knew.

Support for her premise that American officials were well-informed of the realities of Vietnam is offered by Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts in their 1979 book, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*. They assert that, throughout the various administrations involved in the Vietnam conflict, "virtually all views and recommendations were considered and virtually all important decisions were made without illusions about the odds for success." The Pentagon Papers confirm that on the whole the American intelligence community supplied the government with accurate information, and that the Joint Chiefs of Staff took a more realistic view of American prospects than did the National Security Council and other civilian bodies. The lesson here would seem to be that the CIA and the Joint Chiefs should have a greater role in decision-making in the future, and civilian politicians less, but that is hardly an attractive idea for a democracy.

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For Barbara Tuchman, then, the lesson of Vietnam is that in the future the American electorate ought to choose candidates for high office who have more courage and character. More good advice, but experience suggests that we are unlikely to follow it. It may be more than coincidence that the senators who had the courage to oppose the Vietnam War when it was still unpopular to do so—Wayne Morse, Ernest Gruening, George McGovern, Frank Church and, later, J. William Fulbright—were defeated for reelection, and none of them was elected to public office again. To be fair to Mrs. Tuchman, it should be said that the tone of her book suggests that she does not seriously expect the American electorate to heed her sermon.

Closely related to the dispute over whether ignorance was a key factor—either in general or at one particular level of government—is the argument over *how* America got involved so deeply in Vietnam. Some see it as having been a gradual process in which the U.S. government ended up somewhere it did not intend to go to when it began the process. Thus Representative Henry Gonzalez (D-Tex.), in the course of the congressional debate on El Salvador in March 1983, remarked that, "Those of us who remember the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution know just how big a seemingly innocuous commitment can become." Using the same illustration, during the War Powers debate in September of the same year, Congressman Gene Snyder (D-Ky.) claimed that it was no use trying to limit a grant of power to the President. "Obviously, even after he had the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in his pocket, it was not the President's *intention* to use it to expand the American presence in Vietnam." That is why, said Mr. Snyder, it was unwise to grant powers to President Reagan in the Middle East while trying to impose limits on them. "I contend that these limitations and restrictions are nothing more than good intentions—like the ones we heard from the administration in 1964—and we must recognize that a war in the Mideast can be just as hard on good intentions as a war in Southeast Asia was." The solution he urged was to refuse the President even the limited powers for which he asked in the Middle East.

Representative Gonzalez is clearly right in observing that small commitments can develop into large ones without anyone intending for them to do so. But is the Congress then going to stop entering into commitments altogether? Clearly it cannot. And those like Representative Snyder who believe the lesson of Vietnam to be that the President must be strictly limited in

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his power to intervene with armed forces abroad may have achieved less than they had hoped by passing the War Powers Act. Since that time, President Reagan has surely gone much further in involving the United States in, for example, Central America than an apprehensive Congress may have desired; the act seems not to have had all that much effect. There is, therefore, a real question as to whether such legislation can—as it is intended to do—prevent new Vietnams.

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¹ Quoted in Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1978, p. 67.

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