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History and Hindsight: Lessons From Vietnam

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WASHINGTON, April 29 — For a month the public has been immersed in a flood of retrospection and introspection about the Vietnam War, which ended 10 years ago Tuesday. The outpouring indicates that many people are at least as interested in revising history as understanding it.

It has been a time for recalling battles but also for refighting them verbally as some try to apply the lessons of Vietnam to still unsettled ideological disputes and to current political controversies, notably in Central America.

The conflicting interpretations and re-interpretations of America's last major war may be especially bewildering to those who were born after the start of the United States' direct involvement in Vietnam or those who were very young at the time. Both public opinion sampling by polltakers and empirical evidence indicate that the origins, rationales and purposes of the American experience in Vietnam, and the conduct of American officials and

soldiers, are obscure to many people.

But some of the main outlines of what a retired general has called "the one clear failure" in American military history are clear.

The war was, of course, a vast human tragedy and contributed directly to nearly immeasurable suffer-

ing after it ended. It is clearly significant to recall the postwar genocide in neighboring Cambodia, punitive repression by the victorious Vietnamese Communists and the sad saga of refugees from all three countries — Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos — that once were French Indochina.

By Late 1964 Many Knew
South Vietnam Was Losing

The memoirs of all informed American military and civil officials agree that by late 1964 the proxy war was being lost. A major reason was the infiltration of South Vietnam by ever-growing numbers of regular North Vietnamese troops. The initially mild escalation of American effort was being matched by the North Vietnamese, and it would never end.

Faced with the clear possibility of defeat, President Johnson reluctantly supplemented combat support of the South with United States soldiers, with the bombing of North Vietnam and with attempts to curb the flow of men and matériel into the South.

Many senior Johnson Administration officials said air power could be made to persuade North Vietnam to cease fighting. Some argued that Ho Chi Minh, the North Vietnamese leader, would choose to protect his industrial base rather than continue the war.

Subsequent Central Intelligence Agency analysis concluded that even the great weight of bombs dropped, which did very significant damage, never seriously slowed the flow of

men and arms southward. But mindful of how the Chinese joined in the Korean War in 1950's, American officials tailored the pressure on North Vietnam to prevent a possible recurrence.

The American troops first sent to South Vietnam, as well as air crews operating from Thailand and ships of the Seventh Fleet in the South China Sea, were well-trained and aggressive. Morale remained high for several years. The combat units were concentrated in the northern three quarters of South Vietnam, leaving responsibility for the fertile, populous Mekong Delta mostly to the South Vietnamese.

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The author of this article, who reports on military affairs from the Washington bureau of The Times, was a correspondent in Indochina for five years.