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# 10 Years Later, Lessons of the Vietnam War

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WASHINGTON — Ten years after the fall of Saigon, the debate over American involvement in Vietnam remains unresolved. Was it a "noble cause," as President Reagan has said, or an immoral adventure in imperialism, as some of the antiwar activists contended at the time? Was it an honorably intended but strategically misconceived stand against the forces of aggression, or was it a misbegotten manifestation of the arrogance of American power?

The verdict of history thus far has been ambiguous. In the past several years, for example, there have been three major looks backward: one by public television, one by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars at the Smithsonian Institutions and one by the Army's Center for Military History. The striking thing about these efforts is that none uncovered anything new or decisive to explain what went wrong with the military and diplomatic strategies of Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon, anything to explain why the South Vietnamese Government collapsed in April 1975.

It is far from certain that additional historical research will render a clearer verdict. All that is clear is that neither proponents nor critics of the war have been wholly discredited or fully vindicated.

The "domino theory," decried by antiwar critics at the time, proved to be largely but not entirely false. Most

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of Southeast Asia did not fall under Communist rule, but all three of the countries of Indochina did. (As the leaders of several Southeast Asian countries see it, Vietnam bought time for the region as a whole to develop an immunity against Communist-inspired wars of national liberation.)

The "doves" were also mistaken in their widely shared expectation that Hanoi's rule would be relatively benign, and in their dismissal of President Nixon's warnings that there would be a "bloodbath" when the United States withdrew. Ho Chi Minh's war-embittered successors in Hanoi have imposed a grim Stalinist dictatorship on their now unified country, while the genocide con-

## History's verdict is ambiguous

ducted by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia was far worse than the "bloodbath" envisioned by Mr. Nixon.

Whether and to what degree the loss of the war in Vietnam injured America's standing in the world also remains ambiguous.

Henry A. Kissinger warned in February 1975 that if Vietnam fell as a result of the cutoff of American aid, the "gravest doubts" about America would arise over a period of years in the minds of many of our allies. A few countries, such as Israel, expressed apprehension about America after the fall of Saigon, and others, such as the Arab states on the Persian Gulf,

may have been influenced by the Vietnam experience in their decisions not to allow American military bases on their territory.

Elsewhere, the effects of the end of American involvement in Vietnam were either neutral or constructive. The Soviet Union has profited only marginally and China not at all from the spread of Communism in Indochina. The United States has suffered no setbacks in the third world directly attributable to Vietnam. Our European allies and Japan were relieved by what they considered America's "liberation" from Vietnam. The opening to China and the normalization of relations became possible only when it was clear that the United States would soon be out of Indochina, and the most significant period of détente with the Soviet Union began as the war came to a close.

Only when we look at the fallout of the war on our domestic life do its effects seem clear. As then-Senator J. W. Fullbright wrote in 1966, the war in Vietnam "divided and troubled the American people as has no other war in the twentieth century." It destroyed the Johnson Presidency and, with it, the promise of the Great Society, and if it did not exactly destroy Richard Nixon, it certainly contributed to the conditions in which his Administration self-destructed. The war also divided and demoralized the Democratic Party, with effects that are still being felt today.

It undermined trust between Congress and the executive and set in motion a Congressional rebellion against executive prerogative that has gone far beyond the aspirations of its initiators. For reasons largely attributable to Vietnam, Congress has become a suspicious, meddlesome and frequently disruptive partner in American foreign policy.

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Many of these changes might have come about anyway, even without Vietnam, but it seems doubtful that they would have gone as far as they did. The long, inconclusive and seemingly pointless war generated a firestorm of protest against Presidents Johnson and Nixon. The youthful protesters chanting "Hey, hey, L.B.J., how many kids did you kill today?" the marches, the teach-ins, the draft resisters, the "Mayday Tribe" and others who made Richard Nixon a virtual prisoner in the White House were bound to provoke a deep national reaction. The epithets of Vice President Spiro Agnew — "traitors and thieves and perverts . . . in our midst," "misfits and garbage" —

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## Fundamental issues aren't resolved

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were only the tip of that iceberg.

In the longer term, decent, patriotic Americans demanded — and in the person of Ronald Reagan have apparently achieved — a return to pride and patriotism, a reaffirmation of the values and virtues that had been trampled upon by the Vietnam-spawned counterculture. That natural and perhaps inevitable reaction has extended far beyond the point at which equilibrium would have been re-established. We are experiencing a "conservative restoration" marked by militancy in foreign policy and a decline of social concern at home.

In any case, the fundamental issues

of Vietnam remain unresolved: when to intervene and when not to, when to stay the course and when to call it quits. The Vietnam experience of and by itself cannot answer these questions for us. On the contrary, it is more likely to mislead and deceive. Whatever else history teaches us, it shows us the pitfalls of policy made by analogy. Vietnam was not, as many of our policy makers thought at the time, a reprise of what happened in Czechoslovakia and Poland in the 1930's. As applied to El Salvador or Nicaragua, the lesson of Vietnam is to forget about Vietnam and to study the local conflict and its roots, domestic as well as external.

The only clear verdict that history seems to have rendered 10 years after the fall of Saigon is that no foreign venture can succeed without solid domestic foundations — moral and cultural no less than political and economic foundations. Despite recent misadventures in Central America and the Middle East — and notwithstanding failure in Vietnam — America stands reasonably well respected and admired in the world today, especially by contrast with the Soviet Union. It is unlikely that this is a consequence of our late action in Grenada, or in any significant degree the result of our latest advances in missile technology. It is far more likely that it has to do with the freedom and abundance and general attractiveness of our society.

The idea of America as an exemplary "city upon a hill" is not in itself a prescription for effective foreign policy. It is, however, a starting point toward the goal of "no more Vietnams." If Vietnam teaches us nothing else, it is that policies that lack roots and credibility at home are a sure course to disaster. □