

The Final Tragedy Of Vietnam

IT IS UNLIKELY that we will learn the lessons of Vietnam. That will be the final tragedy of the war.

When I say "we," I mean the Government as a whole—the President, the Secretary of State, the leadership on Capitol Hill, Republicans and Democrats alike.

Signs of this came quite soon after we had completed the evacuation of Saigon. The press reported that because of the collapse of South Vietnam the defense budget would have an easy time in Congress this year. Representative Tip O'Neill no longer favored a reduction in US forces overseas, as he had last year. Senator Mansfield would not press the troop level issue. Senator Mondale felt this was no time to "rock the boat." After suffering the severest foreign policy setback in the nation's history, the immediate Congressional reaction was to be less rather than more critical of the assumptions of American policy. Expediency dictated silence. A critical review of the defense budget could come later, if at all. The time for action slipped by.

Then came the *Mayaguez* affair and the dark hint that the Administration welcomed this chance, after Vietnam, to prove our "manhood," a word that began to appear in the Secretary of State's vocabulary. For a day or two the Oval Office seemed to become an operational command post as the President took personal and immediate charge of the military action against Cambodia. As in Vietnam, we relied on force to resolve the problem, not politics or diplomacy. As in Vietnam, our "credibility" was said to be at stake—Kissinger said the world should be made to understand there were limits beyond which we would not be pushed. As in Vietnam, there was no proportion between means and ends, between 41 Americans and an unknown number of Cambodians killed, and 39 Americans returned. Individual Congressional reaction and a unanimously adopted resolution of support by the Senate Foreign Relations

Committee followed lines made familiar by the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution; the only thing missing was LBJ passing out the signature pens, symbolic pay-off for uncritical support. With a few exceptions, no doubts were expressed, no hard questions asked.

In this first post-Vietnam test case—minor league ball to be sure—we did indeed put Vietnam behind us, heeding its lessons not at all.

For ten years Vietnam was in our living rooms every night as we watched the war on TV, immediate and terrifying in its horror. But we could switch it off at will. Is that what we are doing now? Switching it off? Not heeding its lessons? Putting Vietnam behind us?

What are its lessons?

My mind goes back to 1951 to a conversation with R. H. S. Crossman, left-wing British Labor MP, brilliant and unpredictable. "You Americans," he said, "have no imperial tradition and no professional army. You can't fight an imperial war in Korea with a conscript army. You will tear your country apart." Crossman's observation came true in Vietnam: an imperial war and a conscript army. A nation at war, and not at war. A nation split asunder, torn apart. That is lesson No. 1: America cannot fight an imperial war. To fight such a war is too gross a violation of this nation's basic purposes and traditions.

In 1954 I accompanied Robert Murphy, then Deputy Under Secretary of State, to an informal meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to discuss the situation in Indo-China following the defeat of the French. It was General Ridgway vs. Admiral Radford and the rest, Ridgway arguing against involvement in a land war on the Asian mainland. Ridgway, of course, had the President on his side and won the argument. This much of the story is well-known. We lose sight of one crucially important point. Ridgway's argument was not based on whether or not there was a "viable" government in South Vietnam; it was based on a judgment of the US national interest. Whether a Diem regime, a Ky regime, a Thieu regime was "viable" was beside the point. Intervention in a land war on the Asian mainland with its inevitable cost was not in the na-

tional interest. That is lesson No. 2.

Once the decision was made to intervene with force in Vietnam, then the kind of government we were supporting became of overwhelming importance. Frances Fitzgerald has written a brilliant analysis of this subject in "Fire in the Lake." The Government of South Vietnam was a hollow shell. Some FSOs who served in Vietnam may disagree with her, but in my opinion the issue has been settled beyond argument. Events have done that. But even if this war had had a different ending, the cost to the United States would have been too high. Ridgway's point would have still been valid.

In December 1962, Ben Cohen, that kind and clear-sighted counselor, talked to me at length (and on many later occasions) about the dangers he foresaw because of our steadily expanding involvement in Vietnam. He predicted the whole disastrous course of events but could do nothing about it. The White House was no longer interested in his advice. James C. Thomson best explains why in an article in *THE ATLANTIC* in 1968, entitled, "How Could Vietnam Happen?" He said:

"To put it bluntly: at the heart of the Vietnam calamity is a group of able, dedicated men who have been regularly and repeatedly wrong—and whose standing with their contemporaries, and more important, with history, depends, as they see it, on being proven right. These are not men who can be asked to extricate themselves from error."

One of Ben Cohen's principal concerns was in the self-enlarging nature of our involvement. One step led to another. To limit the war, we expanded it, many times, finally invading Cambodia. We repeatedly and persistently miscalculated. Even at the end, we—the President—called for still more military aid. Instead of reconsidering our policy and how we might disengage, we "upped the ante" with each successive failure. In 1967, I attended a meeting with a very high Government official to hear him discuss Southeast Asia. At the end of the meeting, as he was leaving, the very high official said he was having trouble justifying the war to critical audiences around the country. Our rationale for the war was thin and unconvincing. We who at-

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tended the meeting were asked to produce new rationale! We had lost our integrity. We had corrupted ourselves. That is lesson No. 3. Our credibility was gone, not with the rest of the world as this and previous Administrations appeared to believe, but with ourselves.

In 1949-50, I worked for Dean Rusk, when he was Deputy Under Secretary of State. He was then in-between two other jobs—Assistant Secretary for United Nations Affairs and Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs. The two perspectives of these jobs—the UN Charter and the American national interest in stability in Asia—fitted perfectly with his reaction, and the nation's, to the aggression in Korea. In that bipolar world, hawk and dove, realist and idealist could unite in support of UN action to resist aggression. But Korea was a bad precedent for Vietnam; the analogy was false in almost every

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way. Vietnam was civil war, rather than a case of aggression. There was no collective action or collective sanction. The bipolar world (if it ever existed) was gone; our "loss" was no longer necessarily their "gain." But the searing experiences of Korea and of China were in our minds as we moved step-by-step into war. This was our fatal error. Our involvement was an aberration, a legacy of the cold war and of a world that had changed. Vietnam did not represent a vital American national interest or the collective interest of the world community. This is lesson No. 4.

Secretary Kissinger is fortunately in error when he says peace is indivisible. The opposite is true. The world is not that interdependent. We have overworked the concept of interdependence. We have had, simultaneously, war in Vietnam, détente with the Soviet Union, and an opening to China. Peace is divisible and wars can be limited. This fact is the best hope for the future. That is lesson No. 5.

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involvement in Vietnam? It seems doubtful. Where are the voices that speak for America? If they speak, will they be heard?

—DAVID LINEBAUGH

FIRE IN THE LAKE, by Frances Fitzgerald. Little, Brown, 1972.

THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST, by David Halberstam. Random House, 1972.

"How Could Vietnam Happen?" by James C. Thomson, Jr. THE ATLANTIC, 1968.

THE PENTAGON PAPERS. Bantam Books, 1971.

FSJ BOOKSHELF

Don't Give Up the Ship

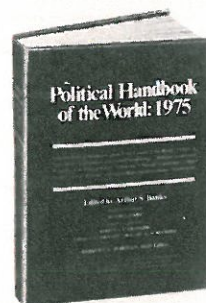
THE CONTROL OF NAVAL ARMAMENTS: *Prospects and Possibilities*, by Barry M. Blechman. The Brookings Institution, \$2.50.

THE BROOKINGS' Studies in Defense Policy reach the ninth volume with Mr. Blechman's cool-eyed look at Soviet and American navies in general and at their roles in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean specifically. The author is pessimistic on the general question of naval arms agreements because he finds the superpowers now have too many arms control matters on their plate, while at the same time both have slowed the detente process. In the two specific studies (he provides a draft agreement for the Indian Ocean) Mr. Blechman sees NATO and Israeli worries stopping any Med agreement, and US desire for an intervention capacity against the oil states stopping any Indian Ocean accord.

Despite the bleak outlook, the author advocates exploring possibilities with the USSR and to that end he offers a realistic outline of the shape of both navies in 1980 that undercuts the Navy's claim to have only a "very thin margin of superiority."

There is a short resume of the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, but Mr. Blechman does not deal with the Western Pacific although the possible presence of four navies in that area in the 1980s may make some agreed restraints there very desirable. The Western Pacific

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