



The "Vietnam Syndrome" and American Foreign Policy

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During the past few months, a new phrase has entered the American political vocabulary. It is called the "Vietnam syndrome." It was apparently coined by Richard Nixon. As employed by the Reagan administration, it presumably means that America's failure in Vietnam and the backlash from it have been primarily responsible for the malaise that has allegedly reduced the United States to a state of impotence in a menacing world. Doctor Reagan and his associates seem determined to cure the disease. Some of the administration's defenders have even justified intervention in El Salvador as essential to that end; and although the White House and State Department may not go that far, their public statements leave no doubt of their determination to exorcise the Vietnam syndrome.

The notion of a Vietnam syndrome presupposes a view of the war which, although rarely articulated in full, nevertheless clearly influences the administration's foreign policy. Reagan himself has stated—contrary to a long-prevailing view—that Vietnam was "in truth a noble war," an altruistic attempt on the part of the United States to help a "small country newly free from colonial rule" defend itself against a "totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest." He and Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig, Jr. have also insisted that it was a necessary war, necessary to check the expansionist designs of the Soviet Union and its client states and to uphold the global position of the United States. They have left no doubt that they regard it as a war that we should have won. America failed, Reagan recently stated, not because it was defeated but because the military was "denied permission to win." Haig has argued that the war could have been won at any of several junctures if American leaders had been willing to "apply the full range of American power to bring about a successful outcome." The defeat was thus self-inflicted, and the consequences have been enormous. "America is no longer the America it was," Haig has stated, and "that is largely attributable to the mistakes of Vietnam."

These views are not, of course, new, nor is it suprising that they have gained credence in recent years. The aggressiveness of the Soviets and the Hanoi regime have made it easier for us to justify our own actions morally and in terms of national security. An explanation of failure which places blame on ourselves rather than elsewhere is probably easier for us to live with. Scholars had begun to revise conventional dovish views of the war well before Reagan took office, and films such as the *Deerhunter*, whatever their artistic merit, promoted a form of redemption. What *is* significant is that this now seems to be the official view and is also a partial basis for major policy decisions. Equally important, it is getting little challenge from Congress and the media, the centers of respectable dissent in the late 1960's and early 1970's. From all appearances, to apply an Oriental usage, 1981 is the year of the hawk.

It seems particularly urgent, therefore, that we examine this view critically in terms of the following very difficult questions: was Vietnam a just and necessary war as is now being proclaimed? Was it a winnable war, our failure primarily the result of our own mistakes? Has the so-called Vietnam syndrome been responsible for our recent inability to control world events and meet foreign challenges?

Let me begin with a caveat. The questions I have just raised cannot now be answered definitively. We are still very close to Vietnam, and it is difficult to appraise the war with the sort of detachment and perspective we would like. The evidence is far from complete. We have no more than roughly 15 percent of the documentation on the American side, and Hanoi has given no indication that it plans to initiate a freedom of information act. More important, some of the major questions concerning the war can never be answered with finality. We cannot know, for example, what would have happened if we had not intervened in Vietnam or if we had fought the war differently. We can do no more than speculate, an inexact science at best.

With these qualifications in mind, we can turn to the essential questions that have been raised about the war and its consequences. For many of those who experienced the Vietnam era, Reagan's "noble war" statement seemed so far off the wall that it could not be taken seriously. But it touched a responsive chord, and this is not surprising. The charges of American atrocities and war guilt that echoed across the land just a few years ago ran across the grain of our traditional sense of our own righteousness. Every war has its elements of nobility, moreover, and it is perhaps proper and even necessary for us to recognize the acts of heroism, sacrifice, and compassion that were as much a part of Vietnam as the atrocities. Certainly it was wrong for us to lay on the veterans the guilt which all of us share in one way or another, and Reagan's statement may have been addressing this point, at least obliquely.

His argument was based on the specific premise that we intervened in defense of a "free government" against "outside aggression," however, and this interpretation badly distorts the origins and nature of the war. In fact, we tried to contain an indigenous revolution that, although Communist led, expressed the deepest and most powerful currents of Vietnamese nationalism. The Vietnam conflict cannot be understood by looking at the situation in 1965, when the major U.S. commitments were made. It is necessary to go back to 1945 or even earlier. The revolution that erupted in Vietnam at the end of World War II sought to eliminate French colonialism and to unify a country that had been divided for several centuries. During the ensuing war against France, the revolution generated widespread popular support, and its leader, Ho Chi Minh, came to symbolize for many Vietnamese the spirit of national independence just as George Washington did for the revolutionary generation of Americans. Ho's Vietminh defeated the French in 1954, despite the massive aid given France by the United States. It would probably have unified Vietnam after 1954, had the United States not stepped in and helped to make permanent a division at the 17th parallel the Geneva Conference had intended to be temporary. The Vietcong revolution, which erupted spontaneously in the south in the late 1950's, and subsequent North Vietnamese support of it, were extensions of the revolution of 1945, a fact which explains their unusual staying power in the face of tremendous adversity. This is not to endow the revolution with a higher morality, as the rhetoric of the antiwar movement frequently did. Its leaders were ruthless in pursuit of their goals and

were capable of great brutality toward their own people and others. The point rather is that throughout much of the 30-year war, Ho's revolution represented the most powerful political force in Vietnam, and we can talk of outside aggression only in the most narrow, ahistorical sense.

Moreover, the governments we supported—by and large our own creations—were free primarily in the sense that they were non-Communist. It should be recalled in this connection that our first crucial commitment in Vietnam came in 1950 in support of French colonialism. When the French departed after Geneva, we inherited what was left of the puppet government they had created in 1949. We grafted onto it the trappings of Western-style democracy and gave it a measure of international respectability. But in fact, the governments of Ngo Dinh Diem and his successors were narrowly based oligarchies, held up mainly by American power, at times quite repressive, and generally unresponsive to the needs and concerns of the predominantly rural population of southern Vietnam. It can be argued, of course, that they were better than their counterpart in the north and provided an alternative to the many Vietnamese who did not want Communism. This may well be true, but it blurs the issue, and we should be wary in the aftermath of the war of endowing the governments we supported with qualities they did not have.

A third point that must be stressed is this: whatever our intent, the way we conducted the war had a devastating impact on the land and people we professed to be serving. In trying to ennoble our cause, we must not forget the consequences of our actions. We prolonged for as much as 20 years a war that might have ended much earlier, with losses of human lives that ran into the millions. The heavy bombing and artillery fire of the high-technology war we fought permanently scarred the landscape of southern Vietnam, obliterating an area roughly the size of Massachusetts and leaving an estimated 21 million craters. Along with Vietcong terrorism, our military operations made refugees of nearly one-third of the population of South Vietnam. We destroyed the economic and social fabric of the nation for which we had assumed responsibility. Despite the moral pretensions on both sides, it seems evident, as Henry Kissinger once observed, that in Vietnam, no one had a "monopoly of anguish and no one . . . had a monopoly of moral insight."

Finally, I would argue that the major American decisions in Vietnam were made primarily on the basis of self-interest, not altruism. This is a sticky wicket, to be sure. It is difficult to separate the two, and American policy makers certainly felt they were acting on the basis of principle as well as self-interest. To put it another way, however, had it been merely a matter of saving a free people from outside aggression, they would not have acted as they did. At every step along the way, they were convinced that the national interests of the United States required them to escalate the commitment.

What were these interests and why were they felt to be so compelling? From 1950 at least into the late 1960's, we viewed Vietnam primarily in terms of the Cold War and the doctrine of containment, the overarching principle of our Cold War foreign policies. The basic assumption of that policy was that we faced a monolithic, tightly unified world Communist movement, orchestrated by Moscow, and committed to world revolution. We viewed the world as split into two hostile blocs, irreconcilably divided by ideology and existing in a precarious equilibrium. Particularly after the fall of China to communism in 1949, we saw the Cold War as a zero sum game in which any gain for communism was automatically a loss for what we called the "free world." To contain the global Communist menace, we constructed a world-wide network of alliances, intervened freely in the affairs of other nations, and went to war in Korea.

From the beginning to near the end, we viewed the conflict in Vietnam primarily from this perspective. Because the revolution was led by Moscow-trained Communists, we assumed it was but an instrument of the Kremlin's drive for world domination. In the early stages, we felt it necessary to block Communist conquest of Vietnam lest it set off a domino effect which could cause the loss of all of Southeast Asia, with presumably incalculable strategic, political, and economic consequences for the United States. Later, we escalated the commitment because of a felt need to uphold our credibility. We had to prove that we would stand by our commitments to dissuade the Communists from further aggressions that could drastically undermine our global position or perhaps plunge us into a global war.

II

This leads directly to question number two: were these assumptions valid? Was the war necessary, as many now allege, to stop the advance of communism and uphold our world position? It is impossible to answer these questions with absolute certainty because we can never know precisely what would have happened if we had not intervened. It seems probable that there would have been war of some kind and that Vietnam would have been unified by force. What then? Would the dominoes have fallen in Southeast Asia? Would there have been a new wave of aggression elsewhere? Obviously, we can never know. I would argue, however, that we badly misperceived the nature of the struggle in Vietnam and that we may have exaggerated the possible consequences of a Communist victory.

The containment policy was misguided both generally and in its specific application to Vietnam. The simplistic, black and white assumptions from which it derived never bore much resemblance to reality. Soviet goals were (and remain) as much the product of traditional Russian nationalism as ideology, and they fell considerably short of world domination. The so-called Communist bloc was never a monolith—it was torn by divisions from the start, and the fragmentation has become more pronounced. In the Third World, nationalism and resistance to any form of outside influence have been the driving force. And there has never been a zero sum game. What appeared to be a major victory for the Soviet Union in China in 1949, for example, has turned out to be a catastrophic loss. In most parts of the world, neither the Soviet Union nor the United States has prevailed, and pluralism and fragmentation have been the norm.

In applying the containment policy to Vietnam, we drastically misjudged the internal dynamics of the conflict. We attributed the war to an expansionist communism bent on world domination. In fact, as I have suggested, it began as a revolution against French colonialism. Ho Chi Minh and his cohorts were Communists, to be sure, rigid and doctrinaire in their views and committed to structure their society along Marxist-Leninist lines. But they were never mere instruments of Moscow. The Soviet Union did not instigate the revolution and in fact exerted very little influence on it until after the United States initiated the bombing in 1965. The Chinese Communists exerted some influence in the early stages, but traditional Vietnamese suspicions of China, the product of a long history of Chinese imperialism, restricted the closeness of these ties. "I would rather sniff French dung for a few years than eat Chinese for a lifetime," Ho Chi Minh once said, expressing Vietnam's deep-seated fear of its larger northern neighbor. Throughout the 30-year war, the Soviet Union and China supported Vietnam when it was expedient to do so, but they

also abandoned it at several critical junctures. North Vietnam played the two off against each other for essentially Vietnamese ends—to rid the country of foreign influence and unify it under one government.

Our rigid application of the containment doctrine in Vietnam had fateful consequences. By placing ourselves against the strongest force in an otherwise politically fragmented country, first in the war against France, later on our own, we may have ensured our ultimate failure. By ascribing the war to international rather than local forces, we underestimated the enemy's commitment, a vital point to which I will return later. Our intervention probably gave the war an international significance it did not have at the outset. Indeed, we may have driven the Vietnamese closer into the arms of their Communist allies than they would have preferred to go.

I also believe that we exaggerated the possible consequences of nonintervention. We will never know whether the domino theory would have operated if Vietnam had fallen earlier, but there is reason to doubt that it would have. Nationalism has proven the most potent and enduring force in recent history, and the nations of Southeast Asia, with their long tradition of opposition to China and Vietnam, would have resisted mightily. By making the war a test case of our credibility, we may have made its consequences greater than they would otherwise have been. By rigidly adhering to a narrow, one-dimensional world view, without adequately taking into account the nature and importance of local forces, we may have placed ourselves in an untenable position.

III

Question number three: was Vietnam a winnable war, our failure there primarily the result of our mistakes, our lack of will, the disunity within our society? Because it has such profound implications for future policy decisions, this is the most important of our questions and deserves the most extended commentary. Those who argue that our defeat was self-inflicted focus on the misuse of our admittedly vast military power. Instead of using air power to strike a knockout blow against the enemy, they contend, Lyndon Johnson foolishly hedged it about with restrictions, applied it gradually, and held back from the sort of massive, decisive bombing attacks that could have assured victory. Similarly, they argue, had Johnson permitted U.S. ground forces to invade North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Laos, Cambodia, and across the 17th parallel, General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition could have worked and the war could have been won.

These criticisms are not without merit. Johnson's gradual expansion of the bombing did give North Vietnam time to disperse its resources and develop a highly effective air defense system, and the bombing may have encouraged the will to resist rather than crippled it as Johnson had intended. A strategy of attrition could not work as long as the enemy enjoyed sanctuary. If losses reached unacceptable proportions, the enemy could simply retreat to safety, regroup and renew the battle at times and places of his own choosing. He retained the strategic initiative.

To jump from here to the conclusion that the unrestricted use of American power could have produced victory at acceptable costs raises some troubling questions, however. Could an unrestricted bombing campaign have forced North Vietnam to accept a settlement on our terms? Obviously, there is no way we can ever know, but there is reason to doubt that it would have. The surveys conducted after World War II raised some serious doubts about the effect of bombing on the morale of the civilian population of Germany and Japan, and the capacity of air power to cripple a pre-industrial society such as North Vietnam may have been even more limited. There is evidence to suggest that the North Vietnamese were prepared to resist no matter what the level of the bombing, even if they had to go underground. The United States could probably have destroyed the cities and industries of North Vietnam, but what then? Invasion of the sanctuaries and ground operations in North Vietnam might have made the strategy of attrition more workable, but they would also have enlarged the war at a time when the United States was already stretched thin. Each of these approaches would have greatly increased the costs of the war without resolving the central problem—the political viability of South Vietnam.

We must also consider the reasons why Johnson refused to expand the war. He feared that if the United States pushed North Vietnam to the brink of defeat, the Soviet Union and/or China would intervene, broadening the war to dangerous proportions, perhaps to a nuclear confrontation. Johnson may, of course, have overestimated the risks of outside intervention, but the pressures would certainly have been large and he would have been irresponsible to ignore the dangers. And even if the United States had been able militarily to subdue North Vietnam without provoking outside intervention, it would still have faced the onerous, expensive, and dangerous prospect of occupying a hostile nation along China's southern border.

Those who argue that the war was winnable also emphasize the importance of American public opinion in sealing our defeat. They shift blame from those who waged the war to those who opposed it, contending that an irresponsible media and a treacherous antiwar movement turned the nation against the war, forcing Johnson and later Nixon to curtail U.S. involvement just when victory was in grasp. As much mythology has developed around this issue as any other raised by the war, and we probably know as little about it as any. Studies of public opinion do indicate that despite an increasingly skeptical media and noisy protest in the streets, the war enjoyed broad, if unenthusiastic support until that point early in 1968 when it became apparent that the costs might exceed any possible gains—and, even then, Nixon was able to prolong it for four more years. Until the early 1970's, moreover, the antiwar movement was probably counterproductive in terms of its own goals, the majority of Americans finding the protestors more obnoxious than the war. Indeed, it seems likely that the antiwar protest in a perverse way may have strengthened support for the government. After 1969, public opinion and Congress did impose some constraints on the government, and the media probably contributed to this. But to pin the defeat on the media or the antiwar movement strikes me as a gross oversimplification.

The problem with all these explanations is that they are too ethnocentric. They reflect the persistence of what a British scholar has called the illusion of American omnipotence, the traditional American belief that the difficult we do tomorrow, the impossible may take awhile. When failure occurs, it must be *our* fault, and we find scapegoats in our own midst: the poor judgment of our leaders, the media, or the antiwar movement. The flaw in this approach is that it ignores the other side of the equation, in this case, the Vietnamese dimension. I would contend that the sources of our frustration and ultimate failure rest primarily, although certainly not exclusively, in the local circumstances of the war: the nature of the conflict itself, the weakness of our ally, the relative strength of our adversary.

The Vietnam War posed extremely difficult challenges for Americans. It was fought in a climate and on a terrain that were singularly inhospitable. Thick jungles, foreboding swamps and paddies, rugged mountains. Heat that could "kill a man, bake his brains, or wring the sweat from him until he died of exhaustion," Philip Caputo tells us in *Rumor of War*. "It was as if the sun and the land itself were in league with the Vietcong," Caputo adds, "wearing us down, driving us mad, killing us." Needless to say, those who had endured the land for centuries had a distinct advantage over outsiders, particularly when the latter came from a highly industrialized and urbanized environment.

It was a people's war, where the people rather than territory were the primary objective. But Americans as individuals and as a nation could never really bridge the vast cultural gap that separated them from all Vietnamese. Not knowing the language or the culture, they did not know what the people felt or even how to tell friend from foe. "Maybe the dinks got things mixed up," one of novelist Tim O'Brien's bewildered G.I.'s comments in *Going After Cacciato* after a seemingly friendly farmer bowed and smiled and pointed the Americans into a minefield. "Maybe the gooks cry when they're happy and smile when they're sad." Recalling the emotionless response of a group of peasants when their homes were destroyed by an American company, Caputo notes that they did nothing "and I hated them for it. Their apparent indifference made me feel indifferent." The cultural gap produced cynicism and even hatred toward the people Americans were trying to help. It led to questioning of our goals and produced a great deal of moral confusion among those fighting the war and those at home.

Most important, perhaps, was the formless, yet lethal, nature of guerrilla warfare in Vietnam. It was a war without distinct battlelines or fixed objectives, where traditional concepts of victory and defeat were blurred. It was, Caputo writes, "a formless war against a formless enemy who evaporated into the morning jungle mists only to materialize in some unexpected place." This type of war was particularly difficult for Americans schooled in the conventional warfare of World War II and Korea to fight. And there was always the gnawing question, first raised by John Kennedy himself—how can we tell if we're winning? The only answer that could be devised was the notorious body count, as grim and corrupting as it was unreliable as an index of success. In time, the strategy of attrition and the body count came to represent for sensitive G.I.'s and for those at home killing for the sake of killing. And the light at the end of the tunnel never glimmered. "Aimless, that's what it is," one of O'Brien's G.I.'s laments, "a bunch of kids trying to pin the tail on the Asian donkey. But no . . . tail. No . . . donkey."

Far more important in explaining our failure is the uneven balance of forces we aligned ourselves with in Vietnam. With the passage of time, it becomes more and more apparent that in South Vietnam we attempted a truly formidable undertaking on the basis of a very weak foundation. The "country" to which we committed ourselves in 1954 lacked most of the essential ingredients for nationhood. Had we looked all over the world, in fact, we could hardly have found a less promising place for an experiment in nation-building. Southern Vietnam lacked a viable economy. The French had destroyed the traditional political order, and their departure left a gaping vacuum, no firmly established political institutions, no native elite capable of exercising effective political leadership. Southern Vietnam was rent by a multitude of conflicting ethnic and religious forces. It was, in the words of one scholar, a "political jungle of war lords, bandits, partisan troops, and secret societies." When viewed from this perspective, there were probably built-in limits to what the United States or any outside nation could have accomplished there.

For nearly 20 years, we struggled to establish a viable nation in the face of internal insurgency and external invasion, but the rapid collapse of South Vietnam after our withdrawal in 1973 suggests how little was really accomplished. We could never find leaders capable of mobilizing the disparate population of southern Vietnam. We launched a vast array of ambitious and expensive programs to promote sound and effective government, win the support of the people, and wage war against the Vietcong. When our client state was on the verge of collapse in 1965, we filled the vacuum by putting in our own military forces. But the more we did, the more we induced a state of dependency among those we were trying to help. Tragically, right up to the fall of Saigon in 1975, the South Vietnamese elite expected us to return and save them from defeat. This is not to denigrate the leaders or people who sided with us or to make them the scapegoats for our failure. The point rather is that given the history of southern Vietnam and the conditions that prevailed there in 1954, the creation of a viable nation by an outside power may have been an impossible task.

IV

The second point central to understanding our failure is that we drastically underestimated the strength and determination of our adversary. I do not wish to imply here that the North Vietnamese and Vietcong were supermen. They made blunders. They paid an enormous price for their success. They have shown a far greater capacity for making war than for building a nation. In terms of the balance of forces in Vietnam, however, they had distinct advantages. They were tightly mobilized and regimented and fanatically committed to their goals. They were fighting on familiar soil, and they employed methods already perfected in the ten years' war against France. The Vietcong were close to the rural population of South Vietnam, adapted its ideology and tactics to traditional Vietnamese political culture, and used the American presence to exploit popular distrust of outsiders. North Vietnam skillfully employed the strategy of protracted war, perceiving that the Americans, like the French, could become impatient, and if they bled long enough they might tire of the war. "You will kill ten of our men, but we will kill one of yours," Ho once remarked, "and in the end it is you who will tire." The comment was made to a French general in 1946, but it could as easily have been said of the Second Indochina War.

Our fatal error, therefore, was to underestimate our adversary. We rather casually assumed that the Vietnamese, rational beings like ourselves, would know better than to stand up against the most powerful nation in the world. It would be like a filibuster in Congress, Lyndon Johnson speculated, enormous resistance at first, then a steady whittling away, then Ho Chi Minh hurrying to get it over with. Years later, Henry Kissinger confessed great surprise with the discovery that his North Vietnamese counterparts were "fanatics." Since our own goals were limited and from our standpoint more than reasonable, we found it hard to understand the total, unyielding commitment of the enemy, his willingness to risk everything to achieve his objective.

The circumstances of the war in Vietnam thus posed a dilemma that we never resolved. To have achieved our goal of an independent non-Communist South Vietnam required means that were either morally repugnant to us, posed unacceptable risks, or were unlikely to work. Success would have required the physical annihilation of North Vietnam, but given our limited goals, this would have been distasteful and excessively costly, and it held out a serious threat of Soviet or Chinese intervention. The only other way was to establish a viable South Vietnam, but given the weak foundation we worked from and the cultural gap, not to mention the strength of the internal revolution, this was probably

beyond our capability. To put it charitably, we may very well have placed ourselves in a classic, no-win situation.

For reasons closely related to the problems we have discussed, I think it would also be wrong for us to attribute our recent woes exclusively to Vietnam. The war has affected us profoundly, to be sure, but our failure there was not so much the cause of our present plight as a symptom of our general decline from world preeminence, the result of broad historical forces beyond our control. Our great power in the years immediately after World War II was to a considerable degree an aberration, the result as much of the devastation wrought by the war in the rest of the world as of our own intrinsic strength. Inevitably, that power has declined, as the Soviet Union has matched us in military and nuclear hardware, as the industrialized nations have regained a competitive position, and as the new nations recently emerged from colonialism have gained in assertiveness. In a variety of different ways, Vietnam demonstrated the new limits to our power, and as much as we long nostalgically for the "good old days," we cannot reverse the forces of history.

As I stated at the outset, the current official view of Vietnam is being articulated at least in part to exorcise the presumed Vietnam syndrome as a first step toward a new global policy. The Reagan administration seems to favor a return to the days of global containment, relying on a massive military buildup and intervention in the world's trouble spots to check Soviet expansion and regain the position we have lost.

I believe that such an approach defies the experience of Vietnam and is both dangerous and ultimately futile. Soviet military power and aggressiveness pose a very real threat to us and may in many instances require a stern response. To assume that the Soviets are responsible for most of the crises that beset today's world, however, is to ignore as we did in Vietnam the local circumstances from which revolutions and regional conflicts derive and which may determine their outcome. To assume that these conflicts can best be dealt with through a form of containment can make bad situations worse. Reagan is probably right in saying that El Salvador will not become another Vietnam, but this may be a clever way of justifying actions that cannot otherwise be justified. The containment approach, in El Salvador, as elsewhere, can lead to unwise and possibly counterproductive commitments to governments which are anti-Communist but also unpopular and unstable. To attempt to bolster such governments through military aid can prolong conflicts which might be ended earlier, inflict great harm on people we are presuming to help, and polarize still fluid situations, driving the insurgents into the arms of the Soviets or Cubans. In Central America, it will likely revive a latent, powerful anti-Americanism, the product of years of gunboat diplomacy.

To adapt to the new and more complex situation we face today requires at a minimum a greater tolerance for revolution, even though it may be leftist, greater patience and restraint, and a more subtle and sophisticated approach than was applied in Vietnam and is being applied in El Salvador. The first question we need to ask in judging crises in the Third World is to what extent they derive from local conditions and to what from Soviet initiative. Assuming that Soviet involvement is not decisive, as may be likely in most cases, we should work quietly and indirectly for a political settlement without making an irrevocable commitment to either side. Should Soviet involvement be the critical factor, we still need to ask whether Soviet success is likely, and if so whether over the long haul it will significantly alter the global balance of power. It may be that what appears a short-term success can turn out over the long term to be a source of weakness rather than strength. Assuming that a Soviet victory would endanger our security, we must still ask whether the local balance of forces is such that success on our part can be achieved with limited external assistance. If that is not enough, the dispatch of American forces is not likely to do the job either and could make things much worse. Rapid escalation, the "win" approach Reagan seems to think should have been tried in Vietnam may not be the solution either, since it may enlarge the conflict without providing any means to resolve it and might result in a protracted war which could lose support after the usual rally-round-the-flag phenomenon has run its course.

I therefore believe it is urgent for us to ask these questions and think in these terms. The world is more complex, confusing, and explosive than at any time in recent memory and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Our power to manage events will probably continue to decline, and a military buildup of the most mammoth proportions will not change this. To those who insist that we must rid ourselves of the Vietnam syndrome and get about our business, I would respond that understanding of and perspective on the Vietnam experience is an essential basis for shaping a constructive and realistic foreign policy.