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Watch on the West

A Newsletter of FPRI's Center for the Study of America and the West Mythed Opportunities: The Truth About Vietnam Anti-War Protests

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by Adam Garfinkle

*This issue of Watch on the West is based on a talk delivered at FPRI's History Institute on "[Teaching the Vietnam War](#)," May 6-7, 2000. Adam Garfinkle, a Senior Fellow at FPRI, is a senior staff member of the National Security Study Group, part of the U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century. He is author of *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*. For a copy of the conference report, contact fpri@fpri.org or call 215-732- 3774, ext. 201.*

In the April 23 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, there appeared a letter to the editor signed by one Carl Oglesby, from Cambridge, Mass., commenting on a remark in the March 19 issue by a Vietnam veteran named Ward Just. It seems that Mr. Just, although conceding that “of course the war was unwinnable,” had added that “the antiwar protesters were not much admired, either, at least by me.” This irritated Mr. Oglesby, a former SDS president, who wanted to know why Mr. Just was willing to leave protest against an unwinnable war to others while telling us how little he admired those others.

There is more than meets the eye to this little exchange. First, by means of this little argument, the editors of the *New York Times Magazine* manage to sneak in the presumption about the unwinnability of the Vietnam War as though it were an unshakable truth. Second, we hear, yet again, how unpopular antiwar protests were at the time. And third, we behold a complete failure (in this case, Oglesby's) to make the connection between the unpopularity of radical antiwar protest tactics and their impact— or lack thereof— on the course of the war.

Encased in this little exchange, therefore, are several myths about Vietnam War-era protests. Let us unpack them in turn.

When people say nowadays that the Vietnam War was unwinnable, they are usually making a canonical statement, not an analytical one. Having sifted through the myth-laden detritus of the war, they have “learned” that the war was unwinnable because, well, it wasn't won. Moreover, they have heard this “truth” so many times that it has transcended the realm of the debatable to become established doctrine, passing the lips more smoothly than a ripe mango. That is why Michael Lind's recent book *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (Free Press, 1999) is so much to be praised. It refuses to take this thoughtlessness masquerading as truth at face value. Andrew Krepinevich's excellent book *The Army in Vietnam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) also made the argument some years ago that the war was, in fact, winnable, as did my book *Telltale Hearts* (St. Martin's, 1995).

But if it means very little to say that the war was unwinnable, what does it mean to say that it was winnable? It means that had the U.S. military and its civilian masters better understood the nature of the Vietnam War, they could have devised tactics to deal with it. There is nothing inevitable about stupidity among people in uniform, nor about feckless secretaries of state or presidents passively accepting bad advice. The tactics pursued by the U.S. military between 1965 and 1968 were downright counterproductive. But even in 1968 it would have been possible to correct those errors— at a price. (Certainly, too, since the war at its end resembled not so much a “people's war” as an old-fashioned conventional war complete with tanks and artillery, the U.S. Army— had it still been around for the fight— surely could have stopped the North Vietnamese army.)

When one speaks of costs, however, one must never leave out the matter of politics. Because the Vietnam War did not involve survival interests for the United States, it was always necessary to consider the price of gaining a strategically important, but not critical, goal. U.S. leaders, as politicians are wont to do, chalked up “costs” not only in terms of casualties and money, but also their own political fortunes.

In sum, had it not been for a concatenation of bad military tactics, civilian overseers who failed in their duty to drag decent advice out of the uniformed military, the wavering of Lyndon Johnson's Wise Men, Richard Nixon's desire to shape a quick “opening” to China, and then his self-inflicted problems over Watergate, the Vietnam War actually could have been “won” at least to the degree that the Korean War was not lost.

Regarding the Vietnam protest movement, there are really two major myths, of which only one is apparent in the magazine exchange noted above. The more obvious one, of course, is the myth that since the war was unwinnable, protests did the United States no harm and much good, and were in fact effective in ending the war. The other myth is the flip side of that view; namely, that the war could have and would have been won had it not been for protests that undermined popular support and led first the Johnson and then the Nixon administration to pull punches.

But this “hard hat” myth of winnability is wholly different from the intention of Lind, Krepinevich, and me. What we meant was that U.S. attrition tactics should have been junked and a “hearts and minds” strategy adopted; in other words, a political approach in which reform in Saigon was as important as strength in the field. What proponents of this “hard hat” myth have in mind is that the United States should have used more firepower, not more brainpower. The belief that the United States was fighting with “one hand tied behind its back” is completely wrong, of course. Doing more of the same would not have won the war; it would only have killed more people — but the result would have been the same, because the

Vietnamese communists (and nationalists) were more willing to be killed than the United States as a society was willing to pay a price to kill them. And that is why, when you hear someone today say that the war was unwinnable because the enemy was willing to take such appalling casualties, you know that that person's thinking has not advanced beyond William Westmoreland's own views, circa 1968.

The protesters' myth is really more interesting. With every passing year one gets the impression that virtually all Sixties types were at antiwar protests. (They were all at Woodstock, too.) It has become unassailable gospel that the protests were noble and effective. They may have been nobly intended, but there is nothing but aging egos and pure wind to sustain the notion that they were effective in stopping or shortening the war. There is evidence, however, that the protests lengthened the war and that more people were killed on account of them.

How so? Political scientists talk about the phenomenon of a "negative follower group," which is defined basically as any group that ticks others off to the point that they become the friend of that group's enemy. All the data we have from the time, and since, show that the obscenity, illegality, and raging anti-patriotism of the antiwar protesters made them the most hated group in America during the late 1960s and early 1970s. When police beat up protesters in the park across from the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968, most people who were watching on television sympathized with the police.

The backlash had significant repercussions on the national political scene. Without the antiwar protests, which were associated in the minds of the "silent majority" with a militarized black power movement that had somehow metastasized from the civil rights movement, George Wallace could never have become a national political figure, if only for a while. Nor would Richard Nixon have won the White House in 1968. Furthermore, the antiwar movement undermined the Democratic Party and hurt Hubert Humphrey's bid for the presidency in a very tight election.) The political reaction to the radical antiwar protests aided both the Johnson and Nixon administrations' efforts to manage growing public disquiet over the war. More Americans would have opposed the war sooner had they not been put off by radical protest tactics.

The truth is that the antiwar movement actually helped elect Richard Nixon to the presidency not just once, but twice. By 1972, the movement had gained enough power in the disheveled Democratic Party to see that George McGovern was nominated instead of a more mainstream candidate who might have kept the party's labor and middle-class constituency intact. And who believes that a Humphrey administration or a Humphrey-like Democratic administration that would have begun in 1969 or 1973 would have fought the war in Vietnam with the intensity that the Nixon administration did, looking for a "peace with honor" that fell to ashes on April 30, 1975?

Yes, the American people did turn against the war, but not because of protests in the streets. They turned against it because eventually the costs seemed to outweigh the benefits. Moreover, they turned against it when the leadership of the country lost its will to continue. Before Lyndon Johnson's famous March 31, 1968, speech throwing in the towel — personally as well as in terms of Vietnam policy— no poll showed that a majority of Americans was against the war. Indeed, what the administration feared most was increasing pressure to escalate. As John Mueller put it in a brilliant book in 1973, the American people basically followed their leaders into war, and then, when the leadership changed its mind, followed them back out again (*War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, published by John Wiley). Moreover, of all the serious survey data done at the time— the only empirical data base there is to study this aspect of the issue — not one poll indicated that antiwar protests were even a tertiary reason in the thinking of those who turned against the war (see my *Telltale Hearts*, chap. 1).

What do these myths and their longevity tell us? First, that good intentions do not always turn into good consequences. Anyone surprised by this statement needs a remedial history course, and possibly a good clap on the ears. Second, that personal myths, which are born of youth and form the foundations of adult personalities, are almost completely immune to the power of facts and logic. Third, that controversial history — history speckled with blood, that is— is always read with the needs of the present uppermost in mind. Fourth, that there is no monopoly in the mistaken interpretation of any historical event. Many errors, many myths, can operate simultaneously — each of them serving "needs" other than truth.

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