

on the Vietnamese battlefields. And by placing Vietnam in the same framework of conventional patriotic values in which Americans viewed their other wars, it reassured a troubled people that they had not, after all, forfeited the special moral standing America claimed for itself among the world's nations. Shaking off Vietnam guilt seemed essential, too, to officials and commentators who feared, not wholly without reason, that a post-Vietnam reaction was preventing the United States from acting effectively in the world.

Clearly, America could not remain forever immobilized by its memories of Vietnam. But to distort those memories was to risk equal policy errors in the future, arising from the same blindnesses that produced the Vietnam failure. For what the United States really lacked in Vietnam was not persistence but understanding—that, and the flexibility to change policies that had proven bankrupt. From start to finish, American leaders remained catastrophically ignorant of Vietnamese history, culture, values, motives, and abilities. Misperceiving both its enemy and its ally and imprisoned in the myopic conviction that sheer military force could somehow overcome adverse political circumstances, Washington stumbled from one failure to the next in the continuing delusion that success was always just ahead. This ignorance and false hope were mated, in successive administrations, with bureaucratic circumstances that inhibited admission of error and made it always seem safer to keep repeating the same mistakes rather than risk the unknown perils of a different policy.

The wounds of that experience were painful enough. With the war finally over, the revisionist belief that it was lost only because of Washington's timidity, rather than for Vietnamese reasons, was the self-infliction of still another wound—a refusal to learn the lesson that had been so expensively taught.

The delusion of Vietnam policy in the Johnson administration, at least until 1968, was that increasing American military force could not just prevent defeat of an anti-Communist regime in Saigon, but could in time discourage Hanoi from supporting the revolutionary movement in the South, and thus end the conflict. The Nixon administration's delusion was more remarkable. It was that exactly the same objective could be reached while American military force was diminishing.

A good deal of evidence suggests that when Nixon and Henry Kissinger moved into the White House in January 1969, they understood that they were inheriting a failure: that the enormous military effort in Vietnam had ballooned out of all proportion to any conceivable American interest there, and that the spectacle of a huge, expensively-armed U.S. expeditionary force thrashing about in an unavailing contest with a poor, middle-sized Asian Communist state was certainly not serving any American purpose. Vietnam was making the U.S. "look like a paper tiger," Nixon is reported to have acknowledged privately in early 1968, adding his private conclusion that "there's no way to win the war. But we can't say that, of course. In fact, we have to seem to say the opposite, just to keep some degree of bargaining leverage." Henry Kissinger too, by his own later account, be-