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A Time of War

Was the Vietnam War 'unwinnable'?

By [ARTHUR HERMAN](#)

America's most controversial war ended 34 years ago this month. There are two schools of thought about what happened in Vietnam. The version taught in colleges and textbooks is that it was the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time. Thanks to Cold War paranoia, the story goes, the U.S. wound up caught in the middle of a civil war that North Vietnam and its leader, Ho Chi Minh, were bound to win and that America and its ally, South Vietnam, were bound to lose.

The second, more recent, version, involving a re-examination of the evidence on the battlefield and at the Pentagon -- and drawing on testimony from the North Vietnamese themselves -- concludes that the U.S. military succeeded far better in Vietnam than was once supposed. The revisionist view suggests that the conflict was not only winnable but largely won by January 1973, when the Paris Peace Accords were signed compelling North Vietnam to recognize South Vietnam and to honor the border between the two countries (an agreement the North immediately violated). By then, however, the U.S. Congress refused to support South Vietnam any further. So America stood on the sidelines while a tragedy ensued and perhaps as many as two million innocent people lost their lives -- and communism won an unearned Cold War victory.

John Prados's "Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975" is, as its title suggests, an attempt to hold the barricades against the new version and resuscitate the old. Mr. Prados, a senior fellow of the National Security Archive at George Washington University and, as he tells us, once a Vietnam War protester, offers a detailed picture of a U.S. government unwilling to confront its mistakes and an American military baffled by a guerrilla insurgency. He weaves the story of the antiwar movement into his account of the war itself in an effort to show how he and other protesters grasped the futility of the war far earlier than the politicians in Washington.

Mr. Prados argues, above all, that America failed in Vietnam because it "failed to understand the Vietnamese revolution," which, in his view, was essentially a long anticolonial struggle. But the tragedy that unfolded after America left Vietnam would suggest that America's leaders, starting with Harry Truman, understood the Vietnamese "revolution" only too well, seeing Ho Chi Minh not as a nationalist but as an ideological soulmate and willing tool of both Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong -- that is, as a man prepared to extend communism's reach regardless of the cost.

In this, Ho resembled North Korea's leader, Kim Il Sung. In fact, the parallels between Korea and Vietnam become more striking over time. In both cases a Stalinist regime in the north tried to overrun its neighbor to the south; in both cases U.S. military force was deployed to fend off the aggression. Mr. Prados glosses over this part of the story, saying nothing about how the regime that took power in North Vietnam in 1954 systematically butchered its political opponents and terrorized the peasantry in ways that would prove to be frighteningly similar to those of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia 20 years later.

Mr. Prados is particularly unwilling to concede that it was the intervention of American ground troops that first halted -- and then, during the Tet Offensive of January 1968 -- finally broke the Hanoi-backed Viet Cong insurgency in the South, compelling the North Vietnamese army to pull back to its sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. The Nixon administration's effort to smash those sanctuaries and to intensify the air war over North Vietnam was what finally forced Hanoi to the negotiating table.

Mr. Prados gives us instead a war in which the Americans can never do anything right and the communists never do anything wrong, until finally thousands of antiwar protesters, including John Kerry and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, take to the streets to force Washington and the American public to face reality and get out of Vietnam.

Far from seeing reality more clearly, however, the antiwar left constructed a fictionalized version of what was happening in Vietnam. The totalitarian Ho was portrayed as an Asian George Washington; a decisive victory like Tet was painted as an American defeat. The average American soldier was depicted as a murderous brute. Likewise, the bombing of Cambodia to prevent that country from being overrun by Hanoi -- a move that

Cambodia's leaders and members of Congress knew about and approved -- was branded as secret and illegal; and the American incursion into Cambodia in 1970 to break up North Vietnamese sanctuaries and wind down the war was presented as a move that widened it.

Then, in 1975, when a massive North Vietnamese army overran the South in blatant violation of the Paris treaty and the North's former allies, the Khmer Rouge, took over Cambodia, certain members of the left celebrated the communist victory as if it were their own -- which, in political terms, it was. When Saigon fell, the headline to Sydney Schanberg's New York Times story read: "Indochina Without Americans: For Most, a Better Life."

Now we know better. We know of the 65,000 South Vietnamese murdered when Hanoi took over and of the thousands of boat people who died fleeing the communist regime and of the perhaps 250,000 who died in re-education camps. But Mr. Prados ends his book by simply pulling a veil over what ensued when America left Vietnam and the communists took over.

It is a fact that the left routinely resists, then as now: Americans fought and died in Vietnam for freedom, just as they are doing in Iraq and Afghanistan today. Whatever mistakes generals and policymakers have made along the way cannot detract from that essential truth -- which should be a part of any reliable history.

Mr. Herman's "Gandhi and Churchill: The Epic Rivalry That Destroyed an Empire and Forged Our Age" appears in paperback later this month.

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