

The U.S. Victory in Vietnam: Lost and Found

The U.S. war against the insurgents in Iraq has raised the specter of the war fought four decades ago against insurgents in South Vietnam. Critics of the Iraq War contend that the Iraqi insurgency now is like the Vietnamese insurgency then, and that the United States today faces a similar defeat. Conversely, supporters of the Iraq War contend that Iraq bears no similarity to Vietnam and that the U.S. defeat in the Vietnam War therefore need not be repeated, especially if the United States demonstrates persistence in its military and political efforts in Iraq.

A very few supporters of the current war (e.g., Melvin Laird, who was Secretary of Defense in the Nixon Administration during the Vietnam War) argue that the two wars are indeed similar, but that the United States had actually won its war in Vietnam by 1973 and it can do so again in much the same way in Iraq.¹ While I disagree with Laird about the similarity of the Vietnam War and the Iraq War—I think they are very different—I believe Laird is correct in his observation that the United States won the Vietnam War in 1973. Of course, this is not the received opinion. If we are to reckon by the “memory” of Vietnam, we had best get the history right.

A Tale of Two Prisms

At the time of the Vietnam War, recent history had provided two very different prisms through which Americans could view the conflict in that strange land which was so remote from any earlier American experience. The first was the prism of the Chinese Revolution of the late 1940s. In this perspective, what had happened in China was best explained by an *internal* dynamic: a repressive government, acting on behalf of exploitative landlords, was challenged by a revolutionary Communist party, acting on behalf of a repressed and exploited peasantry. The ultimate success of the Communist insurgents was due to domestic conditions, particularly their popular cause, and not due to Soviet support and intervention from the outside. In brief, the Chinese Communists were more Chinese than Communist.

From this perspective, what was true of China in the 1940s was understood to be true of Indochina in the 1960s. The conflict there should be seen as the Vietnamese Revolution, with the Vietnamese Communists being more Vietnamese than Communist. Their ultimate (and inevitable) victory, therefore, would pose no real threat to the

James Kurth is the Claude Smith Professor of Political Science at Swarthmore College and editor of *Orbis*.

United States in its great Cold-War struggle with the Soviet Union, or with the very different China. At the time, most academic area specialists dealing with Southeast Asia subscribed to this perspective.

The second prism was the Korean War of the early 1950s. In this perspective, what had happened in Korea was best explained by an *external* dynamic: an aggressive Communist regime in the North, acting with the direct support first of the Soviet Union and then of Communist China, had invaded a vulnerable country and potential democracy in the South. The initial success of the North Korean army was due to Soviet and Chinese support from the outside and not to any popular cause within Korea. In brief, the North Korean Communists were more Communist than Korean.

From this perspective, what was true of Korea and Northeast Asia in the 1950s was understood to be true of Vietnam and Southeast Asia in the 1960s. The conflict there should be seen as a Communist aggression. The Communist North's victory, which was by no means inevitable, would pose a real threat to the United States in its great struggle with the Soviet Union and Communist China. At the time, most academic generalists dealing with international politics subscribed to this position.

Now, many years after the end of the Vietnam War, a good case can be made that both perspectives were right, but that they were so at different times: the war began in the early 1960s like the Chinese Revolution, but it ended in the mid-1970s like the Korean War. The turning point between the two prisms was the mid-point of the war: 1968, the year of the Tet Offensive, the de facto abdication of President Lyndon Johnson, and the election of Richard Nixon.

Political Defeat versus Military Victory

The Tet Offensive of January-February 1968 was obviously a U.S. *political* defeat, but

most military analysts have long agreed that it was actually a very significant U.S. *military* victory.² The counterattack operations of the U.S. military not only seriously damaged the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), but they effectively destroyed the South Vietnamese insurgents known as the National Liberation Front (NLF) or Viet Cong (VC). Thereafter, the real threat to South Vietnam came not from the local insurgents, which were repressed or contained by effective U.S. and South Vietnamese counterinsurgency operations, but from massive infiltration or invasion by NVA conventional forces, which had to be deterred or contained by U.S. conventional military forces. Despite this U.S. military victory, however, after Tet the political will of the United States, and especially the will of the Democratic Party, was greatly eroded. Of course, it had been the Democratic administrations of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson that had taken the United States into the Vietnam War in the first place.

The Strategic Innovations of the Nixon Administration

The Nixon Administration consequently faced a difficult dilemma when it took office in 1969. On the one hand, U.S. military power remained essential in order to win the war, but the sustained use of U.S. ground forces was no longer politically feasible given domestic U.S. opposition. On the other hand, South Vietnamese (SVN) military forces were also essential in order to win the war, specifically the counterinsurgency part of it, but their effective use was not yet militarily feasible. The obvious solution was to expand and improve the SVN forces, not only to the point that they could effectively cooperate with U.S. forces in counterinsurgency operations, but beyond that to the point that they could effectively repress or contain the Communist insurgents by themselves. This solution was called

the Vietnamization Program.

Yet even when this SVN counterinsurgency capability was achieved, the United States would still have to provide conventional military forces to deter and contain the power of North Vietnam's conventional army. Earlier, the Johnson Administration had also tried to deter and contain North Vietnamese intervention. However, its strategy had been largely to fight North Vietnam within South Vietnam. It had engaged in some limited and fitful bombing of the North, but it refrained from going after the "center of gravity" of North Vietnam (the capital of Hanoi, the port of Haiphong, and the population concentration in the Red River Delta) for fear of provoking military intervention by China or the Soviet Union. The Johnson administration was haunted by the memory of what had happened in 1950 during the Korean War, when U.S. military forces "went North" (crossing the 38th Parallel, which had been the border between South Korea and North Korea) and the Chinese intervened. In a sense, one of the most decisive battles of the Vietnam War had actually been fought a decade-and-a-half before, in Korea.

The new Nixon Administration saw that the solution to the dilemma which it had inherited from the Johnson Administration was composed of two parts: First, superpower diplomacy could separate China and the Soviet Union from North Vietnam and strip away the protective umbrella which each provided to the North. The opportunities for a strategy of dividing one's Communist enemies were greatly enhanced after the Chinese and the Soviets nearly went to war over border and nuclear issues in the fall of 1969. Both China and the Soviet Union wanted something from the United States. For China, this was some kind of diplomatic recognition, and for the Soviets, it was an arms control treaty. For these U.S. concessions, each was willing to

withdraw its protection of North Vietnam. The diplomatic maneuvers of President Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger achieved their aims, and in the spring of 1972 the United States concluded its grand strategic bargain with each of the two Communist superpowers.

Second, a vigorous Vietnamization program could create an effective South Vietnamese counterinsurgency capacity and permit the U.S. military to withdraw from this kind of operation. In 1969, most Americans did not take the idea of Vietnamization seriously, and when Americans now look back at Vietnam they usually think that it had no real prospect of success. However, it is instructive to compare the U.S. project of building up the security forces in Iraq since 2003 (Iraqization, so to speak) with the U.S. project of Vietnamization after 1968. At every point during the long Vietnam War (1961-1975), South Vietnam had a more unified and organized government and military than any that has existed in Iraq since the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime and the abolition of Saddam's army in the spring of 2003. The problem in South Vietnam was just that its government and military were nonetheless far less unified and organized than those of North Vietnam.

In fact, the underlying social foundations to support political stability were far better in South Vietnam than they are today in Iraq. There were religious and ethnic divisions in South Vietnam (principally between an 80 percent Buddhist majority, a 10 percent Catholic minority, and a 10 percent composed of other religious minorities), but these divisions did not correlate with territorial ones. There was no prospect of one or more sections of the country seceding from the others. In contrast, in Iraq the intense religious and ethnic divisions between the Shiites, the Sunnis, and the Kurds do correlate with territorial

ones. Secessionist projects are a constant threat, and ethnic cleansing operations are a constant experience. One consequence is that in Iraq, while there are many militias that are truly religious or ethnic, there will probably never be a military that is truly Iraqi. This was not true of South Vietnam.

In any event, by 1969 several developments had come together within South Vietnam to increase the probability of a successful Vietnamization program:

- (1) The aforementioned devastation of the Viet Cong insurgents after Tet.
- (2) Major recent improvements in the stability of the SVN government and the effectiveness of the SVN counterinsurgency forces.
- (3) An effective land reform program, which gave legitimacy to the SVN government and caused peasants to withdraw their support from the Communist insurgents.

As a result of the above three developments, when the U.S. counterinsurgency forces began to stand down, the SVN counterinsurgency forces were able to stand up. The Administration generalized this positive development into the “Nixon Doctrine,” the idea that the United States would not deploy its ground forces in foreign countries in tasks where and when local ground forces were able to perform those tasks. With respect to the specific task of counterinsurgency in South Vietnam, the Vietnamization strategy had largely achieved its aims by the spring of 1972.³

Meanwhile, back in the United States, there were intense and widespread student protests against the Vietnam War, especially in 1969 and 1970—the American emergence of the “Generation of ’68,” or the Baby Boomers. These dramatic protests certainly reinforced the conclusion that the sustained use of U.S. ground forces

in South Vietnam was no longer politically feasible and that the Vietnamization program was a political necessity. Nixon and Kissinger persisted, despite the protests, in their long-term strategy to win the war. And indeed, after a giant surge of campus protests in the spring of 1970, the student movement greatly declined within the next year. The major reason for this decline was that the Administration moved to end the military draft. No longer facing the prospect of their own deaths in the war—only the deaths of the Vietnamese—the students returned to their other, more traditional student priorities. And so, the Administration’s Vietnam strategy continued on its steady course.

The U.S. Bombings of 1972

In 1972, North Vietnam tried to abort the progress of the Vietnamization program with its Spring Offensive, a conventional invasion by the North Vietnamese Army across the 17th Parallel separating North and South Vietnam. However, Nixon and Kissinger had largely completed their diplomatic project and had neutralized both China and the Soviet Union. They were thus able to retaliate against the NVA invasion by bombing Hanoi and Haiphong, the first time that this had occurred in the war. Reeling from the attack, the North had to halt its invasion.

Having demonstrated that it could now bomb Hanoi and Haiphong—the center of gravity of the North—if it chose to do so, the Nixon Administration had greatly improved its position in its ongoing negotiations with North Vietnam over the future of South Vietnam. The U.S. position was further strengthened in November 1972 with Nixon’s re-election by a landslide and in December 1972 with new and massive air strikes upon Hanoi and Haiphong (“the Christmas bombings”). In January 1973, North Vietnam and the United States, along

with an anxious South Vietnam, reached agreement in Paris on the Vietnam Peace Accords.

The Vietnam Armistice of 1973

The Accords provided for a cease-fire or armistice; this would enable the United States to withdraw its military forces from South Vietnam with a semblance of “peace with honor.” (The Korean War had also ended with an armistice in 1953—but not with the withdrawal of U.S. troops.) The Accords also allowed North Vietnam to keep some of its troops on the territory of South Vietnam, an obviously risky situation for the South.⁴

The United States sought to reassure the South with a commitment to provide large-scale and long-term assistance to South Vietnam’s economy and to its military, which would continue the buildup of the South and complete the project of Vietnamization. (This too was similar to what the United States had provided South Korea after the end of the Korean War.) This assistance would enable South Vietnam to deal successfully with any future Communist insurgency using its own ground forces.

The most important element of the Vietnam settlement, however, drew upon the bombing experiences of 1972. In order to enforce the armistice, and in order to deter or contain future conventional aggression by the NVA, the United States promised South Vietnam—and informed North Vietnam—that if the North should once again undertake such aggression, the United States would also once again engage in a massive bombing of the North. (This kind of threat has also always been an implied part of the armistice in Korea.) This would enable the United States to successfully deal with any future North Vietnamese conventional in-

vasion by means of the U.S. Air Force alone.

The NVA forces left within South Vietnam made this last element problematic, however. This weakness or flaw would need to be outweighed or overcome by high U.S. persistence in its economic and military assistance to South Vietnam and by high U.S. credibility in its bombing threat to North Vietnam. But Nixon’s impressive landslide re-election in November 1972, which he took to provide him with a mandate, seemed to make this persistence and this credibility likely well into the future.



U.S. Soldiers in Vietnam

In short, as of January 1973, a good case could be made that the strategy of the Nixon Administration had enabled the United States to *win* its war in Vietnam. As with its earlier war in Korea, the U.S. had not exactly defeated the North, but it had achieved its war aims of preserving the basic territorial integrity, military security, and political stability of the South. All in all, it could be seen as a very impressive achievement, one purchased at great cost in American blood and treasure, and accomplished with the Administration’s great diplomatic skill and sustained political will.

The Reversal of the U.S. Victory

What aborted this grand strategy for Vietnam was Watergate. At the very moment that the Nixon Administration concluded the Vietnam Peace Accords in Paris (January 1973), it was called into federal court because of its burglary of a Democratic Party office in the Watergate building in Washington, D.C., along with its other covert activities directed at the Administration’s political opponents. This devastating political development radically shifted the balance of power between the President and the Congress (which was controlled by the Democratic Party), and

therefore the balance between the Republicans and the Democrats. By this time, the Democrats were dominated by activists who wanted America out of Vietnam as soon as possible and unconditionally. They cared little about the security and liberty of the people of South Vietnam or even about the reputation and credibility of the United States in international politics; they mocked the notion that Communism presented a threat to America and to the world. On the contrary, they cared most about the anti-war (and sometimes anti-American) views of the media and the student protestors, many of whom were now becoming prominent within the Democratic Party. Although the Democratic Party's approach toward the Vietnam War had been rejected in two Presidential elections—1968 and 1972—that party now achieved effective control of U.S. foreign policy through its control of Congress.

Congress soon imposed a very substantial reduction in U.S. economic and military assistance to South Vietnam, greatly weakening the Vietnamization and counterinsurgency element of the Vietnam settlement. It then passed the War Powers Act of 1973, which sought to limit the President's independent use of military force, seriously weakening the deterrence and counter-conventional element of the armistice. The threat of impeachment by Congress then drove Nixon to resign the Presidency in August 1974. Shortly thereafter, the North Vietnamese leadership decided on a major NVA conventional offensive in South Vietnam, to be undertaken in the spring of 1975.⁵

When that offensive came, Gerald Ford, who was now President, and Henry Kissinger, who was now Secretary of State, sought to execute the bombing threat which had underlain the Vietnam armistice and settlement. But this course of action now required the approval of Congress, and

Congress denied the Administration's pleas. Left alone and left without hope, SVN forces were soon overrun, South Vietnam collapsed, and North Vietnam finally achieved total victory in its long and costly war.⁶ Contrary to a popular impression among many today, the Vietnam War was lost, not to an insurgency, but to a massive conventional invasion across a border recognized in international treaties.

What If?

What would have happened if there had been no Watergate affair and therefore no repeal of Nixon's 1972 electoral mandate, and if there had been no Congressional thwarting of the Nixon Administration's Vietnam strategy but instead a continuing support of the same?

Strategic flaws inside South Vietnam: The NVA Presence. On the one hand, by leaving NVA forces within some parts of South Vietnam, the Nixon strategy had allowed a serious *internal* problem of deterrence and containment to remain, one that was not as easy to solve as was the *external* problem presented by NVA forces within North Vietnam itself. On the other hand, the two elements of the strategy (the Vietnamization program and the bombing threat, backed by U.S. persistence and credibility) might have been strengthened so that even the internal threat could have been successfully deterred and contained. The U.S. effort along these lines in Vietnam after 1973 would have to have been even greater than the comparable U.S. effort in Korea after 1953. But if American political will had been behind the Nixon strategy, the strategy probably could have succeeded.

Strategic flaws near South Vietnam: The Cambodian Communists. On the one hand, the U.S.-supported regime in Cambodia almost certainly would have fallen to the Cambodian Communist insurgents (the Khmer Rouge) in 1975 or not long thereaf-

ter. This in itself would have presented a serious threat to the security of South Vietnam, because it exposed the entire, vulnerable South Vietnamese border area near Cambodia to Communist infiltration. On the other hand, after the Khmer Rouge actually took power in Cambodia in 1975 they quickly turned upon and massacred any Vietnamese within Cambodia—Communists as well as non-Communists. Had South Vietnam remained independent, the Khmer Rouge themselves might have denied infiltration opportunities to the North Vietnamese Communist forces.

***The Consequences of the North
Vietnamese Victory: Then and Now***

The initial consequences. In the actual event, all three non-Communist states in Indochina—South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos—fell to victorious Communist forces in 1975. South Vietnam was quickly merged with the North into a united, Communist Vietnam. The new regime rounded up and sent off to jungle concentration camps (“re-education centers”) about one million South Vietnamese who had been associated with the old SVN government and military; half of these would be detained for two to five years, and thousands would die in these camps. In subsequent years, moreover, more than one million Vietnamese fled from Communist Vietnam as “boat people,” preferring the risks of death at sea to life under the Communist regime.

In Cambodia, the consequences of the Communist victory were far worse: the Khmer Rouge executed more than two million Cambodians from all sectors of society, or more than 25 percent of the population. In Laos, where it had been presumed that the Communists would be more moderate than elsewhere, most of the old political and social elite were put in prison, where many died, including the

former king and his family. In short, the first few years after the Communist victories saw a vast wave of retribution and executions roll over the countries of Indochina—another horrifying chapter in what we now recognize as “the Black Book of Communism.”

The response of the United States—and particularly of the Democratic Party and, after 1976, of the Democratic Administration of Jimmy Carter—to all this was to say very little and to do absolutely nothing.⁷ They were joined in their indifference by the now-adults who had been the student anti-war protestors of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Boomer students who had always been so eager to condemn human rights abuses by the U.S.-backed governments of South Vietnam. At the time of the protests, critics had often accused the students of being self-indulgent and simple-minded. Then, when the protests rapidly declined after the end of the military draft, the students were accused of being feckless and hypocritical as well. If there had ever been reasons to doubt the truth of these accusations, they ceased to exist in the midst of the great silence of the ex-protesters now that Communism took its toll throughout Southeast Asia.

Even today, many Boomers (particularly aging members of university faculties) look back on their days of anti-war protesting as the best, most moral moment of their lives, and they proudly take credit for ending the U.S. efforts in the war. But as such, they are morally responsible for the U.S. abandonment of the peoples of Indochina, and they are morally responsible—indeed, because of their great silence after 1975, doubly responsible—for the retribution and executions which were the results of the Communist victories there.

The later consequences. The waves of history continued to roll on over Indochina, however. By late 1978, the disputes between

the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists had reached the point that Vietnam invaded Cambodia and installed a new regime composed of its Communist allies. The ousted Khmer Rouge then began a new insurgency, which the Vietnamese military tried to put down with its own counterinsurgency war. In response, Communist China, which had long supported the Khmer Rouge, invaded the northern border region of Vietnam in early 1980. The Vietnamese military was successful in blunting this offensive, and the Chinese quickly withdrew. In short, within five years after the Communist victories in Indochina, each of the Asian Communist powers or movements which the United States had sought to contain by its military intervention in the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1973—China, North Vietnam, and the Khmer Rouge—had gone to war with each other. In the end, the expansion of Communism in Southeast Asia was indeed effectively contained—not by the United States, but by the Communists themselves.

The eventual consequences. The waves of history still continued to roll on. By the early 1990s, the Communist regime in Vietnam had arrived at the conclusion that it too had to reconcile itself with the post-Cold-War economic program of opening one's country to the world market and to globalization. And thus, by 1995, the twentieth anniversary of the great North Vietnamese victory in South Vietnam, a united and Communist Vietnam was providing very attractive economic incentives to multinational corporations from the United States, Japan, and other capitalist countries so that they would enter Vietnam and establish manufacturing plants there. These incentives were so attractive that many American and other corporations did so, and have continued to do so, down to the present day.

And so, today, if we ask the question,

Who won the Vietnam War?, we might get a different answer than we would have gotten in earlier years. In 1973, it was reasonable to think that the United States had won the war. In 1975, it was clear that Communism, and North Vietnam more particularly, had won the war. In 1980, it was still clear that North Vietnam had won the war, but, given the new wars between the Asian Communist states, it was no longer clear that Communism in general had won the war. And today, given the mutually beneficial and profitable relationship between the Vietnamese Communist regime and American corporations, it is reasonable to conclude that *both* North Vietnam and the United States, each in their own way, won the Vietnam War. But since Vietnam today is very much an active and cooperative participant in the U.S.-led global economic system, and even in the developing U.S. security system for Southeast Asia, perhaps it might be said that, in the end, the United States won, most of all.

But then there is that other question, *Who lost the Vietnam War?* And here the answer is clear: all those South Vietnamese who, during the war, had allied with the United States and relied upon its promises and who, after 1975, paid dearly with their freedom or even with their lives for having done so. Their loss was tragic because their faith in an eventual U.S. victory had proven to be in vain. It had been especially tragic because when victory was actually achieved by the Americans—by the Nixon Administration and the American soldiers in particular—it was then cavalierly thrown away—by the Democratic Party and the student protestors. And with it were thrown away those many thousands upon thousands of South Vietnamese of whom it might truly be said: They lost the Vietnam War.

1. Melvin R. Laird, "Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December

2005), 22-43.

2. Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982).

3. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), chapters 5-6; Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), chapter 13.

4. James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), chapter 7.

5. Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War: The*

Vietnamese Communists' Perspective (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 156-158.

6. P. Edward Haley, *Congress and the Fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia* (London: Associated University Presses, 1982); Stephen T. Hosmer, Konrad Kellen, and Brian M. Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders* (New York: Crane, Russak and Company, 1980).

7. There was an honorable exception in the Democratic Party: George McGovern, who in 1978 publicly urged U.S. military intervention against the Khmer Rouge. See Samantha Power, *A Problem From Hell: America and The Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 132-136.