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More than a decade after its end, the Vietnam war refuses to lie quiet in its historical grave. Its whys and wherefores roil the scholarly community, its passions continue to spill out in books and plays and movies, its legacy vexes and divides our policy-makers. Questions regarding the very nature of the war remain unresolved. Who, we are still wondering, was our enemy? Was it the National Liberation Front (N.L.F.)? Was it North Vietnam? Was it the Soviet Union? China? Both the Soviet Union and China? Or first one and then the other? Was it that still larger, if vaguer, entity "world communism"? Did we, in other words, face a local guerrilla force, or the conventional army of a small state, or a rival superpower, or a league of superpowers, or a coordinated global political movement? Or were we ourselves somehow the enemy? (President Nixon, for one, thought so. In his speech to the nation on November 3, 1969, in which he announced his secret "plan" for ending the war, he told the public, "North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.") And what, correspondingly, was the character of the war? Was it a domestic revolution, a civil war, a war of aggression by a neighboring power, a war of subversion from without, or a strategic move by a global power bent on world domination? Or did we perhaps think it was one of these whereas in fact it was another? Why did we fight? Was it to defend the independence and freedom of a small country? Was it to defeat "wars of national liberation" in a "test case"? Was

it to halt at the earliest possible moment a great power on the march, so as to prevent in our time a repetition of the mistake made by the democracies in 1939, in Munich, when they acquiesced in Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia? Or was it our goal not so much physically to stop an enemy as to preserve our reputation all around the world as a mighty nation ready and able to use its power to advance its interests and beliefs—to preserve what four presidents called the "credibility" of our power? Did our goal change during the war: did we perhaps enter the war for one reason but stay in it for another? How did we get into the war? Were we dragged reluctantly into an Asian "quagmire"? Or, on the contrary, did we carefully and calculatedly apply our power in accordance with theories of "limited war" that had been worked out well in advance by strategic analysts wrestling with the dilemmas of power in the nuclear age? And—perhaps the most baffling question of them all—why did we lose? How did it happen that the self-described mightiest power on earth could not prevail over forces mustered in tiny, poor, backward Vietnam? Was it because our military strategy was mistaken? Or was our military strategy correct, and did we in fact win with it, only to throw away the victory by prematurely withdrawing, under pressure from cowardly politicians, a duplicitous press, and a duped public? Did our political "establishment" suffer a "moral collapse," as Henry Kissinger has suggested, and is that why we lost? Or, on the contrary, did we leave, and lose, not because of any collapse but because we came to our senses and liquidated a hopeless and ruinous effort that we never should have launched? Finally, we ask ourselves, What does it all mean—what lessons, if any, should the United States draw from the experience? Is the lesson that there are certain limits on the usefulness of military

force in imposing our will on other countries? Or is this lesson in fact a perilous "syndrome," a further symptom of the moral collapse that unnecessarily brought on the defeat; and is the proper lesson, therefore, that we should seek to revive our faltering will and assert ourselves militarily in the world? Because these questions concern the nature of the world we live in, and the nature of the United States' obligations in it, the debate is about more than the past; the present and the future are actively involved as well. In late 1966 and in 1967, I was in Vietnam as a reporter for *The New Yorker*; and from then until now I have found myself thinking and writing about the war in one way or another. In what follows, I will not try to address all the questions that have been raised by the war; instead, using the full benefit of hindsight, including material that has been made public in the years since the war's end, I will concentrate on the question why the United States lost in Vietnam. But I hope that in addressing this question I will be able to shed some light obliquely on the other questions as well.

THE VIETNAMESE THEMSELVES

"The Vietnamese themselves" was a phrase constantly on the lips of the Americans waging war in Vietnam when I arrived there in 1966. What the grammatically redundant "themselves" (characteristically spoken with extra emphasis) referred to indirectly was the Americans. The implicit meaning of the phrase was "not the Americans but the Vietnamese themselves." The Americans understood that there were certain things they could not do for their Vietnamese allies. The main one was to build a government that would command the allegiance of the Vietnamese

people. The Americans could do many things in Vietnam, but not this; the Vietnamese *themselves* would have to do it.

In the summer of 1967, in the South Vietnamese province of Quang Ngai, I met an energetic, idealistic young American lieutenant-colonel who had responsibility for the Pacification Program in his area. He was profoundly discouraged with its progress so far. However, he had a program in mind that he believed might remedy the situation. The supporters of the N.L.F., he observed, were highly motivated, but the people who were "supposed to be on our side"—most of whom were refugees who had been driven into camps by American military operations in which their villages were destroyed—were "just blobs." The colonel didn't blame them. "Now they don't have any jobs, or houses, or anything that they can get excited about," he explained. To inspire their loyalty, a number of things would have to be done. First, security would have to be provided for the refugee camps. This could be accomplished by establishing a training program for local young men, who thereby would gain in self-confidence and competence. Then, the villages that had been destroyed in the American military operations would have to be rebuilt—"preferably by the villagers themselves." Next, democratic government would have to be set up in the villages. After that, the corruption that was rampant in provincial government would be eliminated. Finally, the military men now running the regime in Saigon would have to hand the government over to civilians, who would turn it into a full-fledged democracy. *Then* the discouraged people in the camps would have something to get excited about, and would go forth to defeat the N.L.F.

However, the colonel saw a serious obstacle to the fulfillment of his plan. "The Vietnamese have to do it them-

selves," he said, using the familiar formulation. "We can't try to do it for them." He went on: "I know what a tremendous temptation it is to give candy to kids. It makes you feel good inside. You're Number One . . . I have seen so many cases of Americans who want to play Santa Claus and feel warm all over, but this kind of thing is only corrupting, and it destroys the people's pride. If only we could learn."

The colonel's point was irrefutable. As he looked about him, not one of the steps in his hopeful plan had been accomplished. When I asked if I might spend the night in a secure village in the district, he said that I could not, for there was no such village. The temptation for the Americans to take things into their own hands was overwhelming. Yet if they did the South Vietnamese, shunted aside, would grow even weaker, for the more the Americans did things for the South Vietnamese the more dependent they became—a self-defeating result, since the point of the exercise was to strengthen them. Yet the plain fact was that if the Americans didn't do the things they wanted done, the things didn't happen. That was why the United States had felt it necessary to go into Vietnam in the first place. That was why there were almost half a million Americans in Vietnam when the idealistic colonel spoke to me. More than ninety per cent of the budget of the Saigon regime was being supplied by the United States; its armed forces were wholly supplied and trained by the United States; and every South Vietnamese official down to the level of district chief was provided with a full-time "adviser." In the words, in 1967, of General Creighton Abrams, who later became commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (the word "assistance" in the title expressed the wistful hope that "the Vietnamese themselves" would do most of the fighting),

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"The in-depth U.S. advisory network became the 'glue' that held the situation together in many critical respects at the critical local level." Actually, the Americans were more than the glue; they were the structure as well. If the Americans didn't step in and hold the government together, it would collapse, but if they did step in, whatever independent strength it had was still further weakened and the regime's chances of ever standing on its own were further reduced. It's not an exaggeration to say that the whole American effort in Vietnam foundered on this contradiction.

VIETNAMIZING VIETNAM

President Nixon pursued a policy that he called Vietnamization. It was difficult to remember, sometimes, that the country to be Vietnamized was Vietnam. Did it require half a million Americans to turn Vietnam into itself? Wasn't Vietnam Vietnam already? In truth, it was not. It had, in a sense, been made a part of the United States—or, at any rate, the Saigon regime had, for it was wholly the creation and dependency of the Americans. It was all very well to say that "the Vietnamese themselves" should run their own country along the suggested lines; the trouble was that the ones saying this were Americans. Even the wish for Vietnam to be "independent" was an American one. Many paradoxical and comical scenes were enacted throughout the war in which Americans, maddened by their South Vietnamese allies' lack of initiative, ordered them, in effect, to be more independent. There was, however, a kind of Vietnamization that millions of Vietnamese, North and South, did passionately want, and that was the kind offered by the N.L.F. and the regime in the North. They wanted to expel all foreigners, including above all

the Americans, and reunify their country. And this, as soon as the United States left, is what they did.

INTERVENING AND WITHDRAWING

The American government never quite made up its mind whether it was intervening in Vietnam or withdrawing. Usually, it was trying to do both at the same time. No sooner did it start to put troops in than it began to promise to get them out; no sooner did it start to take them out than it began to make dramatic and bloody "demonstrations" of its will to remain. During the long military buildup, officials constantly reported that the end was in sight. During the long withdrawal, President Nixon repeatedly reintervened, first by bombing and invading Cambodia, then by invading Laos, and then by blockading North Vietnam against Soviet and other shipping. It is a key fact about American policy in Vietnam that the withdrawal of American troops was built into it from the start. None of the presidents who waged war in Vietnam contemplated an open-ended campaign; all promised the public that American troops would be able to leave in the not-too-remote future. The promise of withdrawal precluded a policy of occupation of the traditional colonial sort, in which a great power simply imposes its will on a small one indefinitely—as, for example, the Soviet Union does in the countries of Eastern Europe—and it dictated the need, as a matter not so much of idealism as of basic strategy, to build a regime in South Vietnam that could survive the American departure. Had occupation been the policy, no independently strong regime would have been needed; a permanently dependent client state would have sufficed. American policy in Vietnam was called imperialistic. But it is a strange, crippled sort of imperialism that foresees

departing its colonial possession even before it has seized it. At best, it is imperialism on the cheap, in which the colony is supposed, in a manner of speaking, to colonize itself.

WITHDRAWAL AND PUBLIC OPINION

The need to build withdrawal into American policy was dictated by domestic political considerations. The public, as the policy-makers well knew, had no appetite for an open-ended war, "limited" or otherwise. Fresh in everyone's mind was the memory of the Korean war, which as it dragged on, quickly became unpopular with the public. It was after the Korean war that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles announced the policy of "massive retaliation," in which threats of nuclear retaliation would take over the task of responding to local aggression—a task that had been assigned to conventional forces in Korea. The new policy was designed to cost less—to give "more bang for the buck," in the phrase of the day—and to avoid arousing public opposition. Under President Kennedy and President Johnson, the government, nervous about a policy that courted the devastation of the world in every small crisis that might arise, swung away from this reliance on nuclear weapons and back to reliance on ground forces; but the limits on the public's patience with wars fought in faraway places for unclear goals had been demonstrated, and were remembered. Respect for—and fear of—public opinion was more than a limit placed on the government's freedom of action after the war was under way; it was built into the war policy from its inception. Standing always in the background of the decisions made by the American policy-makers in Vietnam was the basic fact that the United States was a democracy, in which the opinions of the public

eventually had political weight and political consequences, including, notably, the policy-makers' possible expulsion from office.

PUBLIC OPINION IN ACTION

Two presidents—Johnson and Nixon—were driven from office because of the Vietnam war. As President Nixon's chief of staff H. R. Haldeman has rightly said, "Without the Vietnam war, there would have been no Watergate." But whereas Johnson, in the last analysis, respected the limits imposed on him by the democratic system and voluntarily left office, Nixon defied the limits and had to be forced out. Nixon, having promised in his election campaign of 1968 to end the war soon, instead protracted it for another five years. That effort was defeated not when South Vietnam fell to the Communists, in April of 1975, but eight months earlier, when Nixon resigned from office under pressure of impeachment proceedings, in which his conviction looked certain. His fall marked the irreversible collapse of any support in the United States for reinter-vention in Vietnam, as secretly promised by Nixon to President Nguyen Van Thieu. Once this was clear, the assault by North Vietnam, and its success, were assured.

TIME

The war must be prolonged, and we must have time. Time is on our side—time will be our best strategist, if we are determined to pursue our resistance to the end.

—TRUONG CHINH, Secretary General of
the Communist Party of Vietnam,
spring, 1947

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We ran out of time. This is the tragedy of Vietnam—we were fighting for time rather than space. And time ran out.

—NORMAN B. HANNAH, Foreign Service officer with experience in Vietnam, 1975

The puzzle of how the world's mightiest power was defeated by a tiny weak one begins to melt away once the principle enunciated by Truong Chinh in 1947 and reaffirmed, twenty-eight years and millions of lives later, by Norman B. Hannah is entered into the equation. Successes in the war for space—the capture of this or that Hamburger Hill—meant nothing if, when it was all over and the Americans withdrew, the balance of Vietnamese forces was left unchanged from what it had been when the United States arrived. The same could be said of the military measuring stick that the American command, vaguely aware that the capture or defense of territory was not a meaningful measure, sought to employ in its stead: the body count. No amount of success by either measure, short of a campaign of genocide, which the United States was never willing to undertake, could alter an elementary fact: that the Vietnamese lived in Vietnam whereas the Americans lived on the other side of the globe. The American intervention was expeditionary and therefore, almost in the nature of things, bound one day to end. The geography that mattered in the Vietnam war was not the position of the troops in the field, it was the position of the countries on the earth. Whatever the nature of things might be, however, the United States had made known its intention to depart the day it arrived, and the Vietnamese adversary had only to wait. The Vietnamese were well-versed in the strategies of time. The Americans, hardly able to see beyond the next

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election, could at best look four or five or six years ahead. A decade was already off the political map. The Vietnamese were accustomed to thinking in decades, even in centuries. In March of 1946, Ho Chi Minh agreed to let the French put troops into Vietnam and keep them there for five years in exchange for the withdrawal of Nationalist Chinese troops, which had been stationed in the northern part of the country at the end of the Second World War. Some of Ho's colleagues took him sharply to task for having agreed to let the former colonial ruler back into the country. "You fools!" Ho answered. "Don't you realize what it means if the Chinese remain? Don't you remember your history? The last time the Chinese came, they stayed a thousand years. The French are foreigners. They are weak. Colonialism is dying. The white man is finished in Asia. But if the Chinese stay now, they will never go. As for me, I prefer to sniff French shit for five years than eat Chinese shit for the rest of my life."

WILL

If time was the unit of strategic gain that counted most in the Vietnam war, the force that counted most—the fire-power, so to speak, in this war for time—was political will. Will—the resolve and fortitude of a people—is always an important factor in war, but in the Vietnam war it was paramount. There were three peoples whose will mattered: the South Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese, and the Americans. Most important, for purposes of the American war effort, was the will of the South Vietnamese. If their will could not be shaped according to American wishes, then nothing the United States did, whether of a civilian or a military nature, could amount to anything. It was not enough, as the colonel in Quang Ngai realized, for the

Americans to impose their will on the South Vietnamese to bend their resisting will to American purposes; the Americans needed to *awaken* the will of the South Vietnamese to actively want what the Americans wanted for them. Only then would there be any chance that the regime in the South could survive the intended American withdrawal. If it fell, all American hopes and accomplishments would fall with it.

NATION-BUILDING

No project was more fundamental to American policy in Vietnam than the effort, which came to be called "nation-building," to create a strong government in the South, but none was more unlikely of accomplishment. As the name suggests, there was no nation in South Vietnam when the United States began sending in its troops. One had to be built. None ever was. In the end, "South Vietnam" did not so much collapse as fail ever to be born. The government could not be defended because it never existed. In politics, as in nature, there are forces that clear the scene of organisms whose strength has declined to a certain point. Again and again, the Saigon regime declined to that point and beyond. Again and again, it came to the end of its natural life. Again and again, it collapsed. But again and again the United States hoisted the cadaver to its feet and tried to breathe artificial life into it. Like a ghost that is denied a grave to rest in, this regime stalked the earth posthumously. Normally, there are certain limits on the ills that afflict governments, placed there by the governments' demise. But in the artificially propped-up Saigon regime these ills—corruption, intrigue, internal warfare—were, like the government itself, given an unnatural lease on life, and attained fantastic, unreal proportions. The chief activity of

one another. Between November of 1963, when President Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown in an American-backed coup and murdered, and February of 1965, five governments succeeded one another, with three of them arriving by coup d'état. If thereafter Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky, two military men, managed to keep power for the rest of the war, the reason was not their strength but everyone else's weakness. While these things were happening, the government was seriously opposed by a Buddhist movement that was largely independent of the N.L.F. Although American officials unfailingly praised the regime in public, they were rarely less than scathing about it in their private judgments. It was one thing for Senator Mike Mansfield, an opponent of the American involvement, to write to President Johnson in June of 1965 that in Saigon "we are no longer dealing with anyone who represents anybody in a political sense." It was another for the American Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, to tell President Johnson a month later, "I don't think we ought to take this government seriously. There is simply no one who can do anything"; or for Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to report to Johnson in December of 1963 that "there is no organized government in South Vietnam"; or for him to call it, in July of 1965, a "non-government"; or for Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy, thinking back to that period later, to characterize Thieu and Ky as brought up from "the bottom of the barrel, absolutely the bottom of the barrel." These expressions were not aberrations; they were thoroughly typical of the opinions of the Americans who had dealings with the Saigon regime. But most galling to the Americans, perhaps, was the seemingly irrepressible inclination of the various regimes that came to power to enter into negotiations with the N.L.F.—a

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move that the United States regarded as tantamount to capitulation. In the words of General Maxwell Taylor in December of 1964, when he was Ambassador to the South, the South Vietnamese leaders would, if faced with a weakening of American support, "rush to compete with each other in making a deal with the National Liberation Front." Such, he found, were the actual results of any serious attempt to turn things over to "the Vietnamese themselves."

WILL II: THE N.L.F. AND NORTH VIETNAM

"We maintain that the morale factor is the decisive factor in war, more than weapons, tactics, and technique," a resolution of the Central Committee of the N.L.F. stated in October of 1961. The resolution went on: "Politics forms the actual strength of the revolution: politics is the root and war is the continuation of politics." The Communists in both the North and the South kept the question of will uppermost in their minds throughout the war. If the strategy of the Communists was to develop and maintain their will, the specific aim of American policy throughout was to *break* that will. The United States had no military strategy other than to punish the enemy so severely that it would simply give up. In the words of Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton, victory would come by "demonstrating to the V.C. that they cannot win." This negative goal, however, ran head on into the requirement for American withdrawal that was built into the war policy. By seeking to "demonstrate" the impossibility of a Communist victory while at the same time promising withdrawal of American forces to the American public, the government turned the war into the waiting game that the Communists felt sure of winning. Once victory was de-

fined in these terms, the clock was set ticking in the war for time, and every day that passed became a strategic gain for the Communists.

The endurance of the Vietnamese revolutionary forces in the face of first the French and then the American military machines is one of the most astounding and mysterious phenomena of its time. As a feat of sustained human will, it inspires awe. The mystery only deepens when certain characteristics of the regime in the North are taken into account. While its passion to achieve independence for Vietnam and to redress deep-seated social wrongs is unquestionable, and certainly was shared by the population at large, the regime's resort to repression and terror at every stage of its career is also unquestionable, and the bitterness created by these practices among large parts of the population is a matter of historical record. When the Communists took power in the North, as many as a million people, most of them Catholics, fled south. Almost immediately, as if to vindicate the wisdom of their flight, the regime launched a campaign of terror against "landlords" in the countryside, killing thousands. In the province of Nghe An, renowned for its anti-French revolutionary fervor, an anti-Communist uprising now broke out, and was ruthlessly suppressed. Later, in a rare and remarkable act of self-criticism, Vo Nguyen Giap said, "We attacked on too large a front, and, seeing enemies everywhere, resorted to terror, which became far too widespread. . . . Instead of recognizing education to be the first essential, we relied exclusively on organizational methods such as disciplinary punishments, expulsion from the party, executions. . . . Worse still, torture came to be regarded as normal practice." In describing the terror as "too widespread" (as opposed, presumably, to just widespread enough) and describing execution as an "organizational

method, Giap revealed much about the normal practices of the regime, from which these "excesses" were a departure. Yet even the excesses were repeated. When the revolutionary forces took the city of Hué for several weeks during the Tet offensive in early 1968, they executed, at the very least, hundreds of people; and when the North Vietnamese took control of the South, in 1975, they created conditions such that tens of thousands of people preferred escape into the South China Sea in boats, most of which never arrived at any destination.

THE RELUCTANT EMPEROR

The rise to power of the Communists as the standard-bearer of the fight for national independence is a fact whose causes are rooted in Vietnamese history. What is clear even to the casual observer is that no Vietnamese force ever arose to seriously challenge them in this role. One historical detail is illustrative of the entire story. The French, wishing to find and promote a Vietnamese figure behind whom to rally the Vietnamese against the Vietminh, led by Ho Chi Minh, could find no one better to pick than the former emperor, Bao Dai. His had been a checkered career. Before and during the Second World War, he had served as titular head of the French colonial government. In March of 1945, at the command of the Japanese, who had let the French colonial structure stand during the war but who now learned that the Free French might be planning action against them, Bao Dai resigned and announced Vietnam's independence from France within the Japanese Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. In August of that year, the Vietminh seized control of Hanoi while Japanese troops looked on, and declared independence, and now the resilient Bao Dai resigned for the second time in one year

and proceeded to serve as "supreme adviser" to the revolutionary government. In 1947, the French entered into negotiations with him, and persuaded him to sign an agreement to be emperor again under what amounted to continued French control. Bao Dai, however, was a reluctant emperor. "A comic scene followed," Stanley Karnow writes in his book *Vietnam*. "Trying to escape his commitment to resume his imperial duties, Bao Dai fled to Europe, where he shifted from one city to another, hiding in cinemas by day and cabarets by night as [French representative] Bollaert chased him like a process server. Bollaert eventually won, and they returned to the Bay of Along on June 8, 1948."

THE REAL WAR

"You know, you never defeated us on the battlefield," said the American colonel.

The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark a moment. "That may be so," he replied, "but it is also irrelevant."

—Conversation in Hanoi in April, 1975,
quoted in *On Strategy*, by Colonel
Harry G. Summers

Throughout the war, the relationship of the fighting in Vietnam to the eventual outcome was unclear. Because the results that mattered were the impact of the fighting on the wills of three peoples, "psychological" gains became more important than tangible ones. In most wars, psychological strategy is a useful adjunct to the actual combat; in Vietnam, the combat was an adjunct to psychological strategy. The fighting was important to whatever extent it influenced the wills of the protagonists; beyond

that, it was "irrelevant." That was how the Communists could lose every battle and win the war. For the real war was not military but political, and it was fought in not one country but three. The problem for the United States was how to cash in its military winnings in political coin. In all three of the political theatres, it failed; worse, each military victory seemed to lead to political reverses. In North Vietnam, it appeared, the American bombing only stiffened the will of the country to resist. In South Vietnam, the victories were won at the expense of pulverizing the country physically, providing a poor foundation for the creation of the strong, independent regime in the South that American policy required. The moral absurdity of "destroying" the society we were trying to "save" was often pointed out; the strategic absurdity of the same policy was less often noted. The Americans in Vietnam liked to speak of the "military half" of what they were doing, but the "half" was in reality more like nine-tenths, and the other one-tenth—the contribution to "nation-building"—was often, in the context of the war, pure mockery. For example, it frequently happened that in driving the enemy out of a village the Americans would destroy it. That was the "military half." The "civilian half" then might be to drop thousands of leaflets on the ruins, explaining the evils of the N.L.F., or perhaps introducing the villagers to some hygienic measures that the Americans thought were a good idea. In the United States, where the public awaited with increasing impatience the promised end of the war, each new battle, even when the body count favored the American side, was evidence that the war would continue indefinitely, and here, too, political ground would be lost.

WILL III: THE UNITED STATES

On the morning of July 21, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson held a meeting with his senior advisers to decide how many additional troops, if any, he should send to Vietnam. Present among others were Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and Adviser for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy, all of whom favored large additional deployments. Almost alone among those present in opposing the increase was Under-Secretary of State George Ball. Repeatedly, after Ball had expressed his worries, Johnson asked him to outline an alternative course. "Tell me, what other road can I go?" Johnson asked at one point. "But George, is there another course in the national interest—some course that is better than this one?" he asked later. At the end of the morning meeting, he called another meeting for the afternoon, to hear Ball's answer. Ball began that meeting by predicting an American defeat in Vietnam. He warned of possible Chinese intervention. He foresaw a "long war." He argued for a "tactical withdrawal" from an unfavorable position. "I think we all have underestimated the seriousness of this situation," he said, according to notes of the meeting. "It is like giving cobalt treatment to a terminal cancer case. I think a long, protracted war will disclose our weakness, not our strength. The least harmful way to cut losses in South Vietnam is to let the government of South Vietnam decide it doesn't want us to stay there. Therefore, we should put such proposals to the government of South Vietnam as they can't accept. Then, it would move to a neutral position. I have no illusion that after we were asked to leave South Vietnam that country would soon come under Hanoi control."

consequences of defeat:

But George, wouldn't all those countries say that Uncle Sam was a paper tiger, wouldn't we lose credibility breaking the word of the three Presidents, if we did as you have proposed? It would seem to be irreparable.

His other advisers agreed. They also did not so much argue with Ball's pessimism (although some did argue that he presented too grim a picture) as articulate an even deeper pessimism about the consequences of an American defeat. McGeorge Bundy regarded the consequences of withdrawal as so utterly "disastrous" that even in the absence of a promising alternative he preferred to "waffle through." Rusk believed that the American commitment in Vietnam made "the U.S. stance with the U.S.S.R. creditable." McNamara agreed.

Today, with South Vietnam and Cambodia under North Vietnamese control, and the United States and the West still intact and strong, it is hard to recall the apocalyptic importance attached by American policy-makers to winning—or, more precisely, to not losing—in Vietnam. Johnson's description of the blow as "irreparable" to the fortunes of American power was characteristic. Nor was this just rhetoric. Johnson paid for his conviction with his presidency. The policy-makers of the Vietnam period were willing to deceive the public about many things (for example, their assessment of the regime in the South), but in this matter the public and the confidential records agree: from the beginning to the end of the Vietnam war, the men in charge of American foreign policy were persuaded that

In the United States, as in North Vietnam, preservation of the nation's will to fight was of course indispensable to the continuation of the war effort, but in the United States the question of will had, in addition, a global significance that far transcended any result that might occur within the borders of Vietnam. As the comments of the President and his advisers make clear, they believed that the war's chief importance lay in the fact that it was a spectacle on whose outcome the opinion of others around the world about American power depended. The word for the specific commodity they thought was at risk in Vietnam was "credibility," and every president who waged the war, from John F. Kennedy, who in March of 1961 told the columnist James Reston, "Now we have a problem of making our power credible, and Vietnam is the place," to Richard Nixon, who in April of 1970 announced to the public that if he had not just ordered the invasion of Cambodia "the credibility of the United States would be destroyed," asserted its central importance. To the Vietnamese foe, the intangible factor of will was indispensable for winning the war, but the goal of the war effort was the thoroughly concrete one of taking control of South Vietnam and uniting it with the North. American policy, however, was psychological in its ends as well as its means. Our attention was on our will itself, and what the appearance of its strength or weakness, as "demonstrated" in Vietnam, would signify to a watching world.

QUAGMIRE

It has been said that the Vietnam war was a quagmire. If so, it was not a Vietnamese quagmire into which the United

States was sucked but an American quagmire—a quagmire of doubt and confusion regarding its power, its will, and its credibility—into which Vietnam was sucked.

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THE ROOTS OF CREDIBILITY

Munich

A lesson drawn from history, reasons of strategy, and domestic political pressure all converged to lend the doctrine of credibility its apparently unchallengeable sway over the minds of the policy-makers in the Vietnam period. The lesson of history, of course, was the lesson of Munich, teaching its conclusion that if aggression by a great power is not faced early it will have to be faced later at higher cost. For a generation of policy-makers, this historical analogy, in which communism (variously defined) played the role of Nazi Germany, provided the key to understanding international events. The analogy was not pulled out of thin air. The policy-makers had heard the Soviet Union proclaim that the future of the world was a communist future. They had watched the Soviet Union support and promote communist movements in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. They had watched the Soviet Union impose its rule on Eastern Europe and back up that rule with the repeated use of military force. They had watched China turn communist, with Soviet support. And they had concluded that in global communism they faced a totalitarian power that, like Nazi Germany before it, was seeking world domination. Turning to Vietnam, they noted that Ho Chi Minh was a dedicated Marxist-Leninist who had lived in Moscow, and they observed him building in the North a single-party communist dictatorship along classic Soviet lines. And they further concluded that the communist movement in Vietnam was in essence an extension of the power of the centralized communist drive for domination of the world.

Yet there were other historical facts, given less importance by the Americans, which led to a different interpretation of events in Vietnam. Vietnam had, of course, been colonized by the French in the nineteenth century, and had been seeking its independence for most of the twentieth. If Ho Chi Minh was an undoubted communist of the old school, he also was an undoubted nationalist, who, more than anyone else, represented his country's longing for independence. The movement for independence, like the communist movement, had a global context: the almost entirely successful anticolonial movements in the former colonial countries, through which dozens of nations were becoming sovereign states. It was, of course, quite possible for Vietnam to become communist and independent at the same time. But it was not possible for Vietnam to become independent and be subjugated by Moscow at the same time: it could not both be a country achieving its independence and be Czechoslovakia in 1938. The key question for American policy was not the virtue of the regime but whether its strength was local or borrowed from a foreign power. If it was the former, then what began locally would end locally; or at any rate, the further spread of communism would depend primarily on local conditions in other countries. If it was the latter, then the further spread of communism could be expected, just as the further spread of Nazism should have been predicted after the fall of Czechoslovakia. If it was the former, the Munich analogy was wrong; if it was the latter, then the Munich analogy was right. The notion that local forces counted more than international ones received further confirmation: the rapidly developing breakup in the nineteen-sixties of the communist movement into a collection of quarreling, and even warring, parties and states, each of which clearly placed its own national or parochial interest ahead of those



dramatic event was the widening gap between these facts, too, were known to the American policy-makers, but they lacked force or influence, and an important reason was the almost hypnotic grip of the Munich analogy upon the policy-makers' minds.

Developments in strategic theory seconded, but also crucially revised, the lesson of history. The chief subject matter of strategic theory was nuclear weapons, and nuclear weapons were much on the minds of the theorists of the Vietnam war. As Ambassador Lodge said in the July meeting with President Johnson, "I feel there is a greater threat to start World War III if we don't go in." And he added, "Can't we see the similarity with Munich?" However, if World War III were in the offing, it almost certainly would involve the use of nuclear weapons, and if they were used, the strategists knew, the outcome would be far different from that of World War II: it would probably not be the victory of one side or the other but the annihilation of both. At the end of the row of falling dominoes there were now two specters: defeat and annihilation. World War II had hardly been a welcome prospect, yet when it came it had been fightable and winnable. World War III, the strategists were coming to agree, would be neither, and any fighting or winning that was to take place had to occur at levels of warfare below the threshold of nuclear war.

"Credibility" first came into vogue as a primary goal of policy in criticisms levelled at the Eisenhower administration's policy of "massive retaliation." For example, in an influential article in 1954, William R. Kaufmann, a professor at Princeton University who later played an important role in the formulation of American nuclear strategy, noted that "we must face the fact that, if we are

In other words, both sides would be destroyed. In that situation, the policy of deterrence is "likely to result only in deterring the deterrer." Moreover, the adversary would know this in advance. Hence, "we must immediately face the prospect that the leaders of the Soviet Union and Red China would hardly endorse a doctrine [of massive retaliation] with much credibility." The way to shore up the United States' jeopardized credibility, Kaufmann believed, was to "show a willingness and ability to intervene with great conventional power in the peripheral areas, after the manner of Korea." It was through these steps in reasoning taken by Kaufmann and other advocates of limited war that the Vietnam war became entangled in considerations of high nuclear strategy, and came to be fought for the novel goal of maintaining the new holy grail of American policy, credibility.

Reinforcing the lessons of history and strategy were the pressures of domestic politics. Ever since Senator Joseph McCarthy and others on the political right had mounted their highly successful campaign of defamation and intimidation of those who they believed had been instrumental in "losing" China to communism in 1949, it had been an axiom of American politics that to "lose" another country to communism would be a sure path to political ruin. It has been said that the United States was deceived into entering and expanding the Vietnam war by its own overoptimistic propaganda. The record suggests, however, that the policy-makers stayed in Vietnam not so much because of overly optimistic hopes of winning—they could not have heard more pessimistic predictions than Ball's or bleaker assessments of the regime in the South than McNamara's—as because of overly pessimistic assessments