

of the consequences of losing. President Johnson had every reason to hate the war. Above all, it threatened to jeopardize the social legislation of his Great Society program. But in the event, the historical, strategic, and political wisdom of the day held him fast in Vietnam, and it was not until his own political fortunes crumbled beneath him that he was released.

THE NATURE OF THE WILL

The will of North Vietnam was solid; that of South Vietnam nonexistent. Only the will of the United States was changeable, wavering. It followed that the critical contests of the war would take place in the arena of American public opinion, much as elections, in their last stages, are decided among undecided voters. The choice before the American people, it is important to point out, was not between victory and defeat. Victory required a political victory not in the United States but in Vietnam—it required success in the misbegotten program of nation-building—and the American public was even more helpless to bring about such a thing than the military was in Vietnam. The question before the American public was if and when to liquidate the hopeless venture, if and when to break the stalemate and let the defeat occur.

In trying to understand the contest for the will of the United States, two actions of the will need to be distinguished. The first is the action by which the will decides which goal it wishes to pursue. Using the word in this sense, one can speak of the will of the American people either to remain in Vietnam or to withdraw. The second is the action by which the public, having made up its mind about the goal, backs up its choice with more or less resolve or determination—with more or less willpower.

Under the provisions of the Constitution for waging war, the two actions of the will are deliberately separated. By requiring a declaration of war, the Constitution seeks to ensure that the nation will first decide upon its goal and only then send its troops forth to achieve it—that the nation will debate first and fight later. In Vietnam, not only was there no declaration of war, there was no concerted attempt, until it was too late, to rally the public behind the war. Instead, there was a deliberate effort to evade public scrutiny. Arguing against the proposition that the Vietnam war was lost because of a collapse of American will at home, Harry G. Summers, in his book *On Strategy*, notes that such a collapse was hardly possible, inasmuch as the national will had never been invoked in the first place. By the time the public was brought fully into the discussion, half a million soldiers were in Vietnam and the public was being asked to ratify an accomplished fact. To the policy-makers' shock and dismay, it declined.

The mingling in the Vietnam war of the debating and the fighting sowed bitterness in the field and at home. The soldiers were carrying out their professional obligation to fight a war into which they had been sent by their democratically elected commander-in-chief. The citizens who opposed the war were faithfully carrying out their no less solemn obligation to decide whether it was in the nation's best interest to be in the war. The tragedy was that the two things were going on at the same time. The civilians were stung to hear themselves attacked for want of patriotism, or for lacking the "will" to resist the country's enemies—for being "nervous nellys," in the phrase of President Johnson. The military, for its part, was baffled and humiliated to find that in the arena in which it had been asked to fight, a mere expression of opinion in a debate at home had equal weight with injury and death in battle. That

a soldier died capturing a hill in South Vietnam was a supreme sacrifice. That a politician or professor made a nice debating point in a lecture hall was only an expression of opinion. But in the scales in which the fate of the Vietnam venture was being weighed, the latter might outweigh the former. The soldiers were in the unenviable position of knowing that the advance they made in the morning by risking or losing their lives might be unravelled in the evening by a protester holding up a sign in a public demonstration, a columnist turning a clever phrase in his column, or a television interviewer giving a government official a skeptical look.

TET

The turning point in the contest for public opinion, most observers agree, was the Tet offensive, in February and March of 1968, in which the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front launched a coordinated attack on more than a hundred cities and other targets throughout South Vietnam. Within days, the attacks were driven back in most of the country; the exception was the city of Hué, which the Communists captured and held for another three weeks. But while the enemy was being driven out of the cities of South Vietnam, public confidence in President Johnson's war policies was being destroyed. Two months after the beginning of the attack, he announced his decision not to run for a second term and his decision to halt the bombing of North Vietnam north of the twentieth parallel. A little more than a month later, on May 10th, peace talks with the North Vietnamese opened in Paris.

Tet was to the United States what the burning of Moscow was to Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812: the beginning of the long road out. Henry Kissinger, who

arrived in the White House a year later as President Nixon's adviser for national security affairs, remarked later that after Tet, "no matter how effective our actions, the prevalent strategy could no longer achieve its objectives within a period or with force levels politically acceptable to the American people." The protracted, bloody, divisive withdrawal began.

Tet did not in itself end the Vietnam war, but it set in motion a vortex of forces that did. The depth of the political consequences was made clear almost immediately, in the Democratic presidential primary in New Hampshire, in which Johnson was being opposed by Senator Eugene McCarthy, who was running on a platform of opposition to the war. Public-opinion polls showed a mixed reaction to Tet. One showed that the percentage of those who wanted the United States to withdraw from the war had actually declined from forty-five per cent (the figure for the previous November) to twenty-four per cent; but another poll taken during Tet showed the percentage of those who approved President Johnson's handling of the war declining from forty per cent to twenty-six per cent. But the measure of public opinion that counted was none of these; it was the vote in New Hampshire, which McCarthy, who before Tet had not been taken seriously as a political force, fell short of winning by only three hundred votes out of fifty thousand cast. Four days later, Robert Kennedy, a still more formidable opponent of the war and of Johnson, announced his candidacy. The next primary, in Wisconsin, was scheduled for April 2nd, and soundings taken by the Johnson camp showed him losing badly. On March 31st, he announced his decision to withdraw from the race.

Within the administration, in February and March, an equally rapid evolution was taking place. In late March,

Secretary of Defense McNamara, apparently having lost his faith in the war effort, left office, and was replaced by Clark Clifford. Johnson instructed Clifford to prepare a report on the war and to make recommendations for the future. Within a few days, Clifford had decided that the United States had to start to disengage from Vietnam. His thinking at the time, which he described later to Stanley Karnow in the form of a series of questions he put to the top military men, exemplified the rapid erosion of belief in the war in the minds of many men close to Johnson:

How long would it take to succeed in Vietnam? They didn't know. How many more troops would it take? They couldn't say. Were two hundred thousand the answer? They weren't sure. Might they need more? Yes, they might need more. Could the enemy build up in exchange? Probably. So what was the plan to win the war? Well, the only plan was that attrition would wear out the Communists, and they would have had enough. Was there any indication that we've reached that point? No, there wasn't.

The military vacillated. General William Westmoreland, commander of United States forces in Vietnam, claimed to be heartened by his battlefield successes—in one interview he likened the offensive to the Battle of the Bulge, as if the collapse of the enemy was imminent—but shortly he undercut his optimistic message (which was falling on deaf ears among the members of the public in any case) by joining with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Earle G. Wheeler in requesting a global buildup in American forces of 206,000 men, of whom 108,000 would be sent to Vietnam. "I desperately need reinforcements," Westmore-

land told the President. On March 10th, the story was leaked to the *New York Times* (which mistakenly reported that all 206,000 men had been requested for dispatch to Vietnam), confirming the growing public impression that the war was out of control. It was two days later that Senator McCarthy achieved his near-victory in New Hampshire.

The 206,000-man troop increase, which was rejected after Clifford's reassessment of policy, would have required mobilization of the reserves—a step that would have sent a particularly strong signal of alarm to the public and that Johnson had rejected several times before. In February, the possible breaching of another important threshold—the most important one of all—became a news story. On February 8th, Senator McCarthy charged that there had been "some demands" in the administration for the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. There followed a series of denials from administration spokesmen, culminating in a statement by the President that "so far as I am aware" neither the "Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of State, nor the Secretary of Defense" had at any time "considered or made a recommendation in any respect to the employment of nuclear weapons." This was true but incomplete. The person conspicuously missing from the list was the President himself, who, alarmed by the course of events in an important battle at the American military base of Khe Sanh in South Vietnam, had queried Westmoreland whether as President he might sometime soon face a decision whether or not the use of nuclear weapons might be required. Westmoreland had replied that their use "should not be required in the present situation," but added that if there were a North Vietnamese invasion across the Demilitarized Zone, then "I visualize that either tactical nuclear weapons or chemical agents would be active candidates for deployment."

As it happened, an economic crisis also was gathering in the crucial months of February and March. The crisis had nothing to do with Tet, but it had everything to do with the Vietnam war. Owing in great measure to a growing imbalance in the federal budget due to the cost of the war, the dollar was losing value in world markets, and a run on purchases of gold had begun. The crisis came to a head in the days just before and after the leak of the troop request and the voting in New Hampshire. On March 11th, there was a run on gold and a flight from the dollar. On March 14th, the Treasury closed the gold market. On March 15th, Johnson wrote a letter to the prime ministers of Europe in which he warned that "these financial disorders—if not promptly and firmly overcome—can profoundly damage the political relations between Europe and America and set in motion forces like those which disintegrated the Western world between 1929 and 1933." The European leaders and financial leaders around the world were worried that a large American troop increase of the kind proposed by Wheeler and Westmoreland would further unbalance the American deficit, further erode the dollar, and spread economic panic. As Gabriel Kolko points out in his book *Anatomy of a War*, anxiety on this score was of crucial importance in the decision by the administration to turn down the troop increase.

In the early nineteen-sixties, Washington planned to fight what in every sense of the word was to be a limited war—limited in casualties, limited in the types of weaponry employed, limited in the number of troops required, limited in its objectives, limited in cost, limited in political impact, and, perhaps most important, limited in time. By March of 1968, every one of these limits had been breached or was in question. The request for mobilization of the reserves, the speculation about the possible need to use

nuclear weapons, the economic crisis, and the political collapse formed a tight, interconnected net of forces. When the President led the country into war, his advisers had assured him that the costs could be borne. After Tet, he found himself facing four distinct abysses—the abyss of endless expanding ground war in Asia, the abyss of nuclear escalation, the abyss of global economic catastrophe, and the abyss of his personal political demise in the primaries in New Hampshire and Wisconsin.

MILITARY DEFEAT, "PSYCHOLOGICAL" VICTORY

Tet presented the military paradox at the heart of the Vietnam war in its most acute form: our adversaries' worst military defeat became their greatest victory in the war. They lost their way to victory. Three days after the offensive was launched, President Johnson held a press conference. Defensively, plaintively, he argued that Tet was a defeat for the enemy, and, sounding the theme of self-defeat that was to so occupy President Nixon later, he urged that Americans not, by their own words and actions, transform the real enemy defeat into a "psychological victory." "Now, I am no great sophisticated strategist," he humbly admitted to the reporters. "I know that you are not. But let us assume that the best figures we can have are from our responsible military commanders. They say 10,000 died and we lost 249, and the South Vietnamese lost 500. Now that doesn't look like a communist victory. I can count." Johnson's appeal announced an interpretation of Tet that was to be echoed throughout the war and after. For example, in *Big Story*, a voluminous analysis of the press coverage of Tet, Peter Braestrup argues that distorted press coverage of the offensive turned an actual victory into a seeming defeat. "Rarely," Braestrup writes,

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"has crisis journalism turned out, in retrospect, to have veered so widely from reality. Essentially, the dominant themes of the words and film from Vietnam, rebroadcast in comments, editorials, and much political rhetoric at home, added up to a portrait of defeat for the allies. Historians, on the contrary, have concluded that the Tet offensive resulted in a military-political setback for Hanoi in the South." This conclusion, in turn, offers support for the conclusion that the war as a whole was a victory won by the soldiers but thrown away by the civilians (though Braestrup himself does not make this broader charge).

The distinction between military results and "psychological" ones became a commonplace at the time of Tet. *Newsweek*, to give just one example, took General Westmoreland to task for judging the offensive in "strictly military—rather than political or psychological—terms," as if to say that the casualty figures and the other results from the battlefield were somehow to be discounted. But what, exactly, was this "psychological" victory in whose name actual military results supposedly lost their meaning? One answer, frequently suggested in the press at the time, was that the offensive disrupted the Pacification Program so badly that it could never recover. Many American officials believed this to be true at the time. However, Braestrup convincingly argues that events in the following years show that the N.L.F., which suffered heavy casualties at Tet, was actually politically weakened by the offensive. The other answer—the principal one offered at the time by the press and by analysts later—is that the "psychological" victory in question was in the United States, in the court of American public opinion. The question then becomes how it could happen that a military victory could bring about a psychological defeat. According to Braestrup, when Robert J. Northshield, a producer for *NBC News*, was once

urged to produce a three-part series showing that Tet had been a military victory for the United States, he rejected the proposal on the ground that Tet was already established in the mind of the American public "as a defeat, and therefore it was an American defeat." In one sense, Northshield was literally correct: because the most important thing at stake at Tet was the will of the American people to continue the war, it was a fact that the offensive was a defeat if the public thought it was. Their thinking it was a defeat made it one, whatever might be going on in Vietnam. However, the public thought what it did because of what the press reported, or misreported. Was the press, then, guilty of tautological reporting, in which it reported on a state of mind that was of its own making? Was Tet a victory for the N.L.F. and North Vietnam because *NBC* and *Newsweek* said it was?

If the war had been a conventional one, fought for "space," then the answer would have to be yes. However, the Vietnam war was a war for time, and in the war for time what our foe had to do was not win battles but demonstrate that it could endure defeats. At Tet, the foe demonstrated its endurance beyond a shadow of a doubt, and in a way that the whole world could see and understand. It did this not by winning any battle but by launching the attack in the first place. The fact that it lost the battle was nothing new—it had lost all the battles of the war since the Americans had arrived with their tremendous firepower; but the fact that, after three years of exposure to that firepower, it could still launch an offensive on the scale of Tet was new. It shed a light backward on American policy so far. It showed that by winning battles we had not been winning the war. It showed the truth of what Clark Clifford learned when he questioned the generals: that our adversaries were not weakening, that they would

not give up soon, that they could match escalations of ours with escalations of theirs. It showed that, in the words of one analyst at the time, the war was an "escalating stalemate." For American policy, however, a stalemate was equivalent to a defeat, because it dashed the hope, on which public support for the policy rested, that an American withdrawal would be possible in the foreseeable future.

To win, our adversaries did not have to prove the positive—that they could defeat us; they only had to prove the negative—that they could not be defeated. Curiously, proving the negative had been the American prescription for victory: we would "demonstrate" to our adversaries that they could not win, and they would give up. Now they turned the tables and demonstrated to us that we could not win. Employed against a foe that, like the Vietnamese Communists, was fighting for its own country, the strategy was bound to fail. Employed against a foe that, like the United States, was fighting a half a world away from home, it was likely to succeed, and at Tet it did.

The precise target that was destroyed by the foe at Tet was not any military installation but a certain picture of the war that had been planted in the minds of the American people by their government. In that picture, the foe's resources were finite, its will weak and breakable. The Saigon regime was a plausible and promising political alternative. The war's cost would place no undue strain on the economy. The limits on limited war would not be breached. Although the war was not won, the end was in sight. Tet shredded this picture, and put a new one in its place. In this picture, the enemy was well supplied and resolute. The Saigon regime was dependent and feeble. Moreover, the importance of this dependence and feebleness for American policy as a whole was beginning to be understood. For example, on February 8th,

Robert Kennedy said in a speech, "We have sought to solve by military might a conflict whose issue depends on the will and conviction of the South Vietnamese people. It's like sending a lion to halt an epidemic of jungle rot." And *Newsweek*, in words that foreshadowed the exchange between the American colonel and the Vietnamese colonel at the end of the war, wrote, "Even if the U.S. was to win a clear-cut military victory in South Vietnam—a prospect that now seems remote indeed—it would be a hollow and ephemeral triumph unless the people of South Vietnam demonstrated the will and ability to govern themselves effectively." In the new war, the economic costs were disastrous, the limits on limited war were insecure and the end was nowhere in sight. The word "stalemate" began to crop up with increasing frequency. In the words of Max Frankel, writing in the *New York Times* in February, Tet "could well create the impression of the stalemate that the Administration has so vigorously denied. If that should ever become the analysis of the American electorate, President Johnson would indeed be vulnerable to the charges of both doves and hawks that he can neither end the war nor win it." The public now understood that the war in its present form would probably last indefinitely and possibly expand greatly, and it had never accepted, or even been asked to accept, such a prospect.

THE FORCES

After the war, Stanley Karnow asked General Tran Do, one of the planners of the offensive, what its goals had been. "In all honesty," he answered, "we didn't achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the South. Still, we inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans and their puppets, and that was a big gain for us. As for

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making an impact on the United States, it had not been our intention—but it turned out to be a fortunate result.” The North Vietnamese had long shown an appreciation for the political dimension of the war, but at Tet it appears that they failed to understand what they had accomplished. They had placed great hopes in a planned uprising in the cities of South Vietnam, and it had failed completely to materialize. They were as dismayed, it seems, by their military reverses and their failed political hopes in South Vietnam as Westmoreland was pleased by them. Insofar as this was the case, none of the principal actors in the Tet offensive were aware of the deeper forces that had been set in motion. But the forces went to work anyway.

GENERAL WESTMORELAND

“In sum, I do not believe Hanoi can hold up under a long war,” General Westmoreland said on February 25th at a press conference. It was one of the most spectacular of his many spectacular misjudgments regarding the war he was fighting. Among all the Americans who played a major role in shaping the American war policy, he was perhaps the one who misunderstood it most purely. There was method in his misunderstanding; he misunderstood the war systematically. His eye was fixed rigidly on the measurements for success in a conventional war—on positions taken or defended, on numbers of enemy troops killed—and was blind to the forces that actually were determining the war's outcome. War is not a game, but in war there are certain principles, or rules, which define the pathways to victory or defeat. Westmoreland was following rules, but they were not the ones that applied to Vietnam. Perhaps they were the rules for the Second World War, as his analogy of the Tet offensive with the Battle of the Bulge suggests.

At times, he seemed to live in a world of his own. Events that cast others into despair filled him with elation. Where they saw unbroken gloom, he found the light at the end of the tunnel. In the game that was in his mind, he had made move after move, winning battle after battle, piling up accomplishment after accomplishment, until victory seemed within his grasp. But he was playing checkers, and the game was chess.

VIETNAM AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Westmoreland may have been an extreme case, but he was hardly alone in seeking to impose the patterns of the Second World War on Vietnam, as the unshakeable reliance of the policy-makers on the Munich analogy shows. It has to be said in Westmoreland's defense that if the Munich analogy had been the correct one, his conventional strategy would in all likelihood have fit the facts of the case. It was an assumption of the analogy that events in Vietnam were the work of an outside power. If that had been so, two other things would also have been so. First, because the forces opposing the United States would have been outside ones, the American forces probably would have been a suitable and effective instrument for battling them. In that case, American victories in battles would have led to victory in the war, “psychological” factors notwithstanding. Second, there might well have emerged a strong, legitimate political force in South Vietnam which, galvanized into action by the foreign attempt to take away the country's independence, would, with appropriate assistance from the United States (always aiding the local forces, never supplanting them), have been able to build a strong regime based on the support of its own people—thereby providing this crucial element in the American formula

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tional strategy was at odds at every point with the actual war he was fighting, it was fully consistent with the war his civilian superiors had thought they were sending him to fight.

WIN OR GET OUT

Tet created a consensus of dissatisfaction with President Johnson's war policy but no similar consensus regarding a policy to replace it. Some people wanted the United States to win the war, and others wanted the country to withdraw. Many—perhaps the majority—professed to prefer either alternative to current policy, and adopted the opinion that the United States should "win or get out." Even after the war ended, this opinion survived as one of the most popular formulations of what the United States should have done in Vietnam. Holding this opinion was one of the luxuries of being a citizen on the sidelines of events rather than a policy-maker at the center. For while the public supposedly was broad-mindedly willing to accept either winning or getting out, it was hardly willing to accept the consequences that the policy-makers knew to be all but inevitable if either prescription were actually to be followed. The policy-makers knew that if they tried to "win"—for example, by invading North Vietnam—they would incur greatly increased casualties and risk a general war, which could become a nuclear war. And they knew that if they got the United States out of the war, it would be lost. And they knew, too, that however pleased the public might be with its sensible-sounding win-or-get-out formula, it was likely to be very unhappy either with a wider war or with losing the war. The public's distaste for a wider war was

demonstrated in the landslide defeat by President Johnson of Senator Barry Goldwater, who had recommended a greater war effort, and it was now being demonstrated again in the public's reaction to Tet. And the public's distaste for losing countries to communism had been demonstrated by the political hue and cry following the "loss" of China in 1949. The public's true counsel was win (but don't wage a wider war) or get out (but don't lose) and neither course corresponded to anything that was possible in the actual world.

THE LEGACY

The defeat in Vietnam left the public with two unsatisfied but contradictory yearnings, which corresponded to its two vain prescriptions for ending the war. On the one hand, feeling humiliated by the defeat, it wanted a victory somewhere. On the other hand, chastened by the terrible price paid in Vietnam, it dreaded paying the cost in money and lives for such a victory. Ideally, the United States would win something somewhere without having to pay any price. Miraculously, just such a victory was provided, in 1983, when the Reagan administration invaded Grenada (population 108,000) and overthrew its leftist government. Grenada was the legacy of Vietnam. A political pollster's dream, it permitted the United States to win and get out, the objective that had eluded the policy-makers for more than a decade in Vietnam.

WINNING IN VIETNAM

In his carefully reasoned, strikingly original analysis of Vietnam, *On Strategy*, Colonel Harry G. Summers refights

and wins the Vietnam war. Rejecting as he does the notion that the war was lost because of a collapse of national will at home, he becomingly (but in my opinion mistakenly) places the blame for the defeat squarely on the shoulders of his own military profession, whose job it was, he argues, "to judge the true nature of the Vietnam war, communicate those facts to our civilian decision-makers, and to recommend appropriate strategies." Had they done their job right, Summers believes, the war could have been won.

The great mistake of the American military, in his opinion, was to take the Communists at their word when they said that in Vietnam they were fighting a "people's war," or "revolutionary war." In the early years of the war, he grants, the N.L.F. was a force to be reckoned with, but then the war began to change. Around 1965, the North Vietnamese began to send their troops south, and the threat to South Vietnam was transformed into a conventional one. He quotes the pithy Norman Hannah: "In South Vietnam we responded mainly to Hanoi's simulated insurgency rather than to its real but controlled aggression, as a bull charges the toreador's cape, not the toreador." Lunging at the false target, the military became mired in political tasks that were not suitable to it, including nation-building. Summers is as contemptuous of nation-building as any dovish critic of the war. "It is difficult today to recall the depth of our arrogance," he writes, and goes on to quote, and mock, an article written for *Army* magazine in 1962: "Although the official U.S. policy is to refrain from injecting Americans into foreign governments under our tutelage and support, the pragmatic approach is to guide the inexperienced and shaky governments of the emerging nations by persuasion and coaxing if possible, and by hard-selling and pressure if the soft methods don't work." And

he approvingly quotes an article written in 1976 by General Frederick C. Weyand, who served as commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam:

The major military error was a failure to communicate to the civilian decision-makers the capabilities and limitations of America military power. There are certain tasks the American military can accomplish on behalf of another nation. They can defeat enemy forces on the battlefield. They can blockade the enemy's coast. They can cut the lines of supply and communication. They can carry the war to the enemy on land, sea, and air. . . . But there are also fundamental limitations of American military power. . . . The Congress and the American people will not permit their military to take total control of another nation's political, economic, and social institutions in order to completely orchestrate the war.

Many critics have suggested that in sending the military to perform political tasks, the American policy-makers misunderstood the political aspects of the war. Summers, equally contemptuous of military meddling in politics, turns the argument around and says that the practice also "obscured the true nature of military force." The price for this loss of clarity was great, in his opinion, for the real task for the United States in Vietnam—stopping the aggression from the North—was one for which the military was excellently suited. Five divisions, withdrawn from their futile mission of supporting the South Vietnamese government with search-and-destroy missions in the south and redeployed in a defensive line just below the Demili-

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tarized Zone and stretching across Laos to the Thai border, could, he thinks, have accomplished the mission.

It's quite possible, of course, that both criticisms of American policy are correct: that the United States misunderstood both the political and the military sides of its endeavor. And while fighting wars in retrospect is no doubt a good deal easier than fighting them at the time, it may be that Summers identifies a military strategy that would have been superior to the one followed by Westmoreland. ("Superior" in this context means superior in relieving the regime in the South from military pressure.) Unanswered and almost unaddressed by Summers' strategy, however, is the political question, which would not have vanished because the American military had prudently withdrawn from the effort to resolve it. Summers and Weyand are surely right in arguing that it is the job of soldiers to defend nations, not to build them. But in South Vietnam it was necessary to create a nation before it could be defended, whether at the Demilitarized Zone or elsewhere. In addressing this unfulfilled but basic need, Summers can only fall back on the old refrain that "the Vietnamese themselves" would have taken care of it: "What the United States could never do was 'solve the internal problems' of South Vietnam. Only the Vietnamese themselves could accomplish this task."

LESSONS OF VIETNAM

A nation can impose its will on another through intervention with military forces, but not after they have been withdrawn.

In our time, the peoples of even the smallest countries are powerfully resolved to choose their own political

destinies. Acting within their own borders, they have done more in the last forty years to change the political map of the globe than the superpowers have.

The fact that a people has chosen its own destiny does not mean that it has chosen wisely. (Witness Iran.)

There is abroad in our world a force mightier than force—call it popular will, call it political action. Repeatedly, the possessors of overwhelmingly superior force—the United States in Vietnam, the Shah in Iran, Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines—have, to their disbelief, found themselves overmatched by it.

The range of circumstances in which the use of force is effective has decreased in our world. The limited-war theory that guided the Vietnam war started with the assumption that nuclear weapons were no longer usable instruments of force. The war was fought in part to "demonstrate" that instruments of force below the threshold of nuclear war were still usable. The demonstration failed. The proposition was disproved. The limited-war forces encountered local forces—of which the most important were political, not military—with which they could not cope. The lion failed to stop the jungle rot. (However, as we now know, the eclipse in many parts of the world of military power, foreign and local, by local political power need not cause the United States to despair. In many countries—Spain, Portugal, Greece, Argentina, the Philippines, among others—the victorious local political forces have brought forth democracies. Not in every case does right-wing dictatorship give way to its left-wing counterpart.)

The government of a democratic country should not go to war without first obtaining the support of its people. Winning this support is not a "problem" for the policymakers to solve after the fact, an ingredient to be added to

the mixture once the war is under way. It is the foundation of the war effort, and when it is not present the war should not be fought at all.

When popular support is lacking, wars fought to secure liberty abroad undermine liberty at home.

The power and prestige of the United States are based on more substantial stuff than our image-conscious policymakers have believed in recent years. They are prone to a drastically pessimistic view according to which the failure of American power anywhere must lead to its collapse everywhere. It was this pessimistic view of the global situation—compounded of the lesson of Munich and nuclear strategic theory of the late nineteen-fifties and early sixties, and summed up in the obsessive concern with the "credibility" of American power—and not mistaken optimism about the situation in Vietnam, that pinned the United States in Vietnam for more than a decade. Events have shown this view to be false. South Vietnam fell, but the United States still stands.

THE LAST DAYS

Colonel Summers discovers within the "people's war" in Vietnam a conventional war that he thinks could have been won, and in this conventional war he believes he has identified "the true nature of the war." As conclusive proof, he offers the postmortem on North Vietnam's final victorious offensive against the South written by General Van Tien Dung, the North Vietnamese Army's field commander at the time. In this document, called *Our Great Spring Victory*, Summers finds the classic, Clausewitzian essence of the war finally revealed, stripped bare of any cant about "people's war." "General Dung's account of the North Vietnamese final offensive reads like a Leavenworth

practical exercise on offensive operations," Summers writes. He continues, with unconcealed admiration, "Like the plaque at the entrance to our own Command and Staff College—'Audace, audace, toujours audace'—the North Vietnamese General Staff charged with planning the endeavor of Dung's four Army corps worked beside a large poster which read, 'Lightning speed, more lightning speed; boldness, more boldness.' They put the motto into practice." Here was no vague thinking about the primacy of the "political" over the "military," or "psychological" victories over battlefield ones. Instead, as Summers shows, there is only a cool and rational appraisal of the opposing armed forces, and a carefully thought-through plan for military victory. For example:

The question was to determine the correct direction for developing the operations of the Central Highlands forces in the most continuous, rapid and effective manner in order to make full use of their might in the least possible time. Such a direction must be aimed at destroying as many vital forces of the enemy as possible and strategically dividing both militarily and administratively the territory under the Thieu administration's temporary control of the south in order to upset the arrangement of the strategic positions and the strategic situation of the enemy.

In Dung's account, the principles of classical warfare seem suddenly to come to life. Here are forces "massing" to overwhelm the foe; here are feints and diversions; here are attacks "developing" according to sound strategic principles. And all of it is proceeding like clockwork, or even better, for, as Dung notes, the cadres "could not draw maps

quickly enough to catch up with the advance of our forces. The ironies inherent in Summers' picture are rich: the mighty United States Army is mired in woolly-headed, "fashionable" strategies of "people's war" put forward by Communist propaganda, while Communist generals, entirely unburdened by any such nonsense, are applying our traditional military principles to defeat us.

If General Dung's account in *Our Great Spring Victory* were all we knew of the fall of South Vietnam, it would indeed appear as if the real war in Vietnam was a conventional one, and that the North Vietnamese won it by outstrategizing (though not outfighting) us. But we know more, and in the full historical record something much stranger than the rational and orderly victory described by General Dung emerges. When the North Vietnamese struck, in March of 1975, a sort of shudder ran through South Vietnamese society from top to bottom. Like a building that hangs suspended in midair for a split second after its foundations have been dynamited, the government of South Vietnam remained standing briefly, and began to go through motions of responding; then it flew to pieces. "The military fate of South Vietnam really was sealed in about twenty days," write Stephen T. Hosmer, Konrad Kellen, and Brian M. Jenkins in *The Fall of South Vietnam*, which was written for the Historian, Office of the Secretary of Defense. It was, in the words of one South Vietnamese officer who spoke to Hosmer, a rout "unique in the annals of military history." At the top of the government, the authors write, there was "irresolution and violent reversal of strategy." Within a few days of the attack, President Thieu made a ruinous decision to in effect abandon large portions of the northern section of South Vietnam by withdrawing the troops there farther

south. These troops, judged unable to defend their territory by their commander, soon proved incapable even of retreating. Instead, they disintegrated as a military force. Scenes of pointless horror began to unfold along the route of abortive withdrawal. In the words of a South Vietnamese colonel:

I saw old people and babies fall down on the road and tanks and trucks would go over them. . . . Nobody could control anything. No order. The troops were mixed with the dependents and civilians and were trying to take care of all the children and wives. You can't imagine it.

And according to another officer:

The soldiers kept shouting insults at Thieu for this impossible and terrible retreat. Some reached the limit of despair and killed their officers. An artillery commander was shot to death by some Rangers who wanted his beautiful wristwatch. The despair was so great that at one point two or three guerillas arriving at the scene could make prisoners of a hundred Rangers.

Soon, the pandemonium of the retreat spread to the society at large. The phrase "disintegration of society" is given concrete meaning by what now occurred. South Vietnamese soldiers, far from fighting the enemy, began to battle one another and shoot civilians. They went on rampages of looting. A South Vietnamese officer described the scene in Danang:

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Bands of children, hungry and thirsty, wandered aimlessly on the streets, demolishing everything which happened to fall into their hands. Danang was seized by convulsions of collective hysteria.

And an American reporter on the scene wrote:

People are jogging pointlessly and crazily down the streets. Others are taking houses apart, piece by piece. A young man walks outside carrying a wooden door, wrenched from its hinges, atop his head. Another is carrying bits of broken glass in his hands.

As for fighting between the opposing armies, it was rare. In the words of one American official on the scene, there was "no war." In the city of Nha Trang, there was "no fighting at all," a South Vietnamese colonel recalled. The same was true at Hué and Danang. In I Corps, there was no large battle. With the exception of a few engagements, in which units of the South Vietnamese Army stood and fought, the same pattern repeated itself throughout the country. The officers deserted the men, and the men fled or went on rampages. A colonel recalled the scene at Nha Trang:

No one in charge of the whole area. So everyone is thinking about running. That is all. Each province chief is in charge of a big sum of money, so everyone tries to get it out from the treasury and run with it.

Something other than a military defeat was occurring. A society was tearing itself to shreds, and it was the action of

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this dissolution, not North Vietnamese shells and bullets, that was the specific process by which South Vietnam fell. In the words of more than one South Vietnamese official to Hosmer, "We defeated ourselves."

The collapse of South Vietnam revealed its true nature, and with it, the true nature of the war. It was a society entirely without inner cohesion, held together only by foreign arms, foreign money, foreign political will. When, deprived of that support, it faced its foe alone and the mirage evaporated, it was revealed for what it was—a loose collection of individuals. In their bones, the officials of the Saigon regime knew that by itself South Vietnam had no powers of resistance. Their real "plan" for defeating the North Vietnamese, as they told Hosmer, was American reintervention in the war. They wanted the United States to "do something." When it became clear that it wouldn't, they gave up. So great was the habit of relying on the United States that as the government was falling rumors became widespread that a "deal" had been struck between the Americans and the North Vietnamese to let them have the country. Having depended on the United States' support for several decades, the South Vietnamese apparently could not conceive of a fate that might befall them other than by American arrangement.

The record of the fall of the South does not, strictly speaking, contradict General Dung's version of it, but it places it in a completely different light. There is no reason to doubt that everything he says happened happened—that, in best Clausewitzian fashion, he executed plans that, for example, involved "simultaneously and actively carrying out diversionary tactics to attract the enemy to the northwestern part of the Central Highlands in order to enable our side to maintain secrecy and surprise in the south until we opened fire on Ban Me Thout," or that he fash-

ed things in such a way that in spite of overall equality his infantry with South Vietnamese infantry, the ratio troop strength in I Corps was "5.5 of our troops for each enemy soldier," and "the ratio of tanks 1.2 to 1." Nor there any reason to doubt that all this planning was just brilliant as Colonel Summers believes it was. But there every reason to doubt that it caused the North Vietnamese victory, or that it revealed "the true nature of the war." For in actuality "there was no war."

The North Vietnamese, victors over the French, and acknowledged even by their foes to be masters of the military art, never did win any battles in the war against the United States. When they faced a force mightier than theirs—the American military machine—they lost every time. When they faced a foe they could beat—the South Vietnamese—he ran away so fast that he could not be engaged. In neither case did it make any difference. The Communists' defeats at the hands of the Americans led to victory over them, and the failure to engage the South Vietnamese led to the same result. The reason in both cases was the primacy of politics in all phases of the Vietnam war and in all theatres of the conflict. In the first case, even as the United States was winning battles, the American people were turning against the war. In the second case, the political collapse of the South everywhere outran the attack by the North. General Dung's feints and diversions played to an empty theatre, his traps closed on a vacuum. The motto of the North Vietnamese forces might be "Lightning speed, more lightning speed," but the political forces fuelling the collapse of the South were faster still. The North Vietnamese Army was moving so fast that its cadres could not keep it supplied with maps, but History, racing in the same direction, arrived at the goal first, snatching victory from the jaws of victory.

It fell to one Bui Tinh, a colonel in the North Vietnamese Army, to take the surrender of the Saigon regime.

"I have been waiting since early this morning to transfer power to you," General Minh, who had been head of state for only the last two days, told Bui Tinh when he met him.

"There is no question of your transferring power," Bui Tinh answered. "Your power has crumbled. You cannot give up what you do not have." Bui Tinh meant that the collapse of South Vietnam was already complete and that General Minh now represented nobody, but his words were also true in a broader sense. The power of the South Vietnamese had never been truly theirs, whether to keep or to hand over. It had belonged to the Americans, and the Americans were gone.