

PART ONE

Chapter I

CONTAINMENT, LIBERALISM, AND VIETNAM:

BACKGROUND TO THE AMERICAN WAR

On the third night of Tet, the Vietnamese lunar new year, in 1788, the Emperor Quang Trung, leader of the Tay Son movement, drove on Hanoi with his elephant brigade. The Tay Son, mostly a peasant group, aimed to conquer the Chinese forces of Sun Shiyi which had invaded and occupied northern Vietnam just weeks earlier. Quang Trung's army shocked and routed the Chinese troops, who panicked as they fled across the Red River, causing a pontoon bridge to break and large numbers of Sun's soldiers to drown. Shortly thereafter, the Qing dynasty recognized Quang Trung's state and withdrew from Vietnam. The Tay Son had ousted the Chinese and gained national independence.

Precisely 180 years later, in 1968, another force of Vietnamese nationalists, inspired by Ho Chi Minh and others, many of them peasants like the Tay Son, staged a similar uprising at the beginning of Tet. Despite suffering significant losses, the Vietnamese troops--the Viet Cong [VC] in the south and the People's Army of Vietnam [PAVN] in the north--faced another great power, the United States, and ultimately sent a clear message to the American public and its political and military leaders: the war in Vietnam would not be won! Though the fighting continued until 1975 when the southern capital of Saigon either fell or was liberated, depending on one's perspective, by the early months of 1968 the United States was facing up to the failure

of its efforts to preserve an anti-Communist government in the southern half of Vietnam. Peasant nationalists living in an underdeveloped Asian nation, led by a frail, goateed old man who wore simple clothes and sandals, had stooped up to and overcome the greatest power in the world. The spirit of Quang Trung lived on in Ho Chi Minh, and the Americans suffered the same fate as the Qing.

Vietnam: Nationalism, Communism, and Resistance

The paths to 1968 and 1975 were long in the making. The ideals and ideologies that drove the Vietnamese independence movement--anti-colonialism, national liberation, Communism--had been developing well before the Americans came to Vietnam. Indeed, the successful war against the United States grew out of political seeds planted well over a century earlier. Not long after French colonizers arrived in the 1860s with gunboats and troops to take over the area collectively known as Indochina--including Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina in Vietnam, as well as Cambodia and Laos--natives in the region began to protest and resist the brutal French rule, especially in Vietnam. By the turn of the twentieth century, Vietnamese poets and revolutionaries, often one and the same, were agitating for dignity and national sovereignty. After World War I, when the underdeveloped world was simply not included in Woodrow Wilson's call for an end to colonialism, the Vietnamese independence movement grew and became increasingly radical under the leadership of Ho and others. During World War II, those nationalists, collectively referred to as the Viet Minh, resisted Japanese occupation, often with the support of the United States. Japan's defeat in that war, it seemed, meant that Vietnam would finally regain its independence, and in September 1945, Ho even proclaimed the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam [DRVN] with its capital in the north at

Hanoi. International politics, however, intervened and the French moved back into Indochina and resumed control, as oppressively as ever. Thus began what we now call the “First Indochina War.”

From 1945 to 1954, the Viet Minh, with huge popular backing from most levels of Vietnamese society, fought the French and finally defeated them in 1954, after the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu. Again, however, an outside power, this time the United States, snatched victory from Ho and the Viet Minh. Rather than recognize the DRVN, the United States and other nations--both American-allied and Communist--divided Vietnam along its seventeenth parallel. In the northern half, Ho would govern the DRVN; below the seventeenth parallel, the United States essentially invented the Republic of Vietnam [RVN], and for the next two decades would pour billions of dollars, millions of tons of equipment, and hundreds of thousands of soldiers into Vietnam to try to preserve it. In 1945, Vietnam had been little more than an afterthought for U.S. policymakers. It eventually became the centerpiece in the Cold War, the site of America’s longest, most difficult, and most divisive war. Why Vietnam?

The “Burdens” of Power

World War II created a new global order. Before 1940, Britain, France, and Germany all claimed power to rival the United States, as well as extensive formal empires; the United States was mired in economic depression and was limiting its international political commitments; while the Bolshevik regime was still solidifying internal power in the Soviet Union and hoping to avoid wider European conflict. Faced with the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s, the British and French appeased Adolph Hitler, the Soviet agreed to a non-aggression treaty, and the United States basically sat on its hands. Hitler’s attacks against Poland, France, Britain, and the Soviet

Union, however, finally dragged the major powers into world war (with a huge assist from the Japanese strike at Pearl Harbor of course) and shattered the existing world order. After World War II, the United States and Soviet Union would emerge as the dominant powers, respectively leading the forces of Capitalism and Communism. Britain and France were facing the losses of their colonies. Germany had to rebuild and de-Nazify its bombed-out country. In Asia, the corrupt and ineffective Chinese government of Jiang Jieshi was trying to fend off the onslaught of the Chinese Communist Party [CCP], led by Mao Zedong, while the Japanese, with American direction and aid, were being transformed into the foundation for Capitalist expansion and anti-Communism in Asia.

The United States had interests in all those areas. In Europe, Americans hoped to rebuild Britain, Germany, France, Italy and other countries along Capitalist lines to provide resources and markets while also using those areas to prevent the Soviet Union from spreading Communism beyond Eastern Europe. In Asia, the Roosevelt and Truman administrations strongly supported Jiang Jieshi against the CCP, though it was clear to American diplomatic and military officials that Mao's victory was likely if not inevitable. In Japan, American dollars aimed to rebuild that country along free market lines as well, again both to provide opportunities for American businesses and to stop the Left.

In both Europe and Asia, the United States pursued an overall strategy of containment, preventing Communism from spreading beyond its already-established borders. In Europe, American economic aid, through programs like the Marshall Plan, and military support, best demonstrated by the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], helped maintain a heavily-armed truce throughout the Cold War. In Asia, however, the Cold War

became hot as the United States sought to first contain and then roll back communism, first in Korea and more particularly in Vietnam. To American policymakers, Third World nationalism--in India, Guatemala, the Congo, Iran, Vietnam, and scores of other places--was not distinguishable from Communism; nationalist movements trying to eliminate outside control were viewed as probable enemies. American leaders took a clearly defined and often simplistic "Us vs. Them" approach to the Cold War. As a result, the United States violently tried to contain the Vietnamese Revolution even though Ho had hoped to develop strong ties with America, had never been particularly close to Stalin, and though supported by Mao, held a traditional Vietnamese distrust of China. Containment, except in rare instances such as Yugoslavia, did not allow for nuance, and so the United States went to war to contain, then roll back, the Vietnamese national liberation forces. A generation later, the United States left Indochina in defeat.

The Liberals' War?

America's containment strategy flowed naturally out of the world liberal system it had established. The term "liberal" today means something much different that it did in the immediate post World War II period, and that shift in definition was in large measure caused by the Vietnam War. Today, liberals are derided as advocates of big government who want to take away the hard-earned money of working people and redistribute it to the poor and minorities. Culturally, a liberal is often perceived as permissive and lacking traditional values. Liberals, in Richard Nixon's famous phrase from the 1972 campaign, favored "amnesty, acid, and abortion." While the truth of such stereotypes can be questioned, the effectiveness of the post-Vietnam attack on liberalism is quite clear. The war shattered the liberal consensus in the later 1960s and ushered in new world and domestic orders. Since that time, American politicians and pundits

such as Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George Will, Rush Limbaugh, Bill Clinton, and countless others have gained power and fame by criticizing the liberalism of an earlier generation.

But Liberalism was not always the caricature that Newt Gingrich and others have made it out to be. In the World War II era, Liberalism was the organizing principle for the United States to establish hegemony over the globe and unparalleled economic progress and social reform at home. In that period, liberalism was equated with Capitalist expansion, free markets, increases in production at home, good wages, and domestic reform to stabilize the American economic and social systems. Liberals had conducted World War II; established a global economy after the war based on free trade, private investment, and transnational corporations; tried to transport American culture abroad (“Coca-colonization” as critics dubbed it); fostered economic growth at home through a Keynesian system of military spending; and pursued civil rights for African-Americans to end the shame of the southern apartheid system and expand the domestic market as well.

Liberalism, however, also brought with it aggression on a global scale. In their efforts to remake the world along liberal, Capitalist lines after World War II, American leaders such as Secretaries of State Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles and President John F. Kennedy, among others, essentially held that the United States had the privilege of intervening in the affairs of nations that were not following the U.S. model or were acting too independently. Thus, when nationalist or Leftist governments like those of Jawaharlal Nehru in India, Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran, Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala, Sukarno in Indonesia, Fidel Castro of Cuba, Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, and many others were perceived as challenging America’s economic or strategic interests--oil in Iran, fruit in Guatemala, investments in Cuba, anti-

Communist security in South Asia--the United States was compelled to act. Accordingly, the United States facilitated the overthrows of Arbenz, Mossadegh, and Sukarno, boycotted Castro, or tilted toward Pakistan. But nowhere did the United States try as hard or for as long to get its way as in Vietnam.¹

Given the liberal world view, the effort to make a new world guided by Capitalism, free markets, private investment, and political pluralism may have made conflicts such as Vietnam inevitable anyway, especially given the growth of Nationalist-Socialist-Communist movements in the aftermath of World War II. Vietnam, perhaps, had the bad fortune to become the test case for global liberalism. Even if one does not accept the concept of historical inevitability, it does seem clear that the American war in Vietnam was produced by forces that preceded the 1950s and had significance for all points on the globe, not just Indochina.

On To Vietnam

“Most of the men I commanded were like Rambo,” Capt. J.B. Wilcox explained in an interview with Mark Slackmeyer in the comic strip *Doonesbury*, “they wanted to win. But I had my orders: ‘Don’t win. We’re not here to win. Take it easy on the enemy.’”² Garry Trudeau’s satire of the *Rambo* movies of the 1980s still draws laughs, but also offers a realistic depiction of a popular view about Vietnam. Many supporters of the war--politicians, military officials, media representatives--have an explanation for the U.S. defeat there: Americans actually won the war on the battlefield but were sold out at home. The United States, many of them argued, lost because weak politicians did not authorize American forces to take the measures necessary to win, antiwar protestors undermined the war effort, and the media was too critical. Had the Americans invaded North Vietnam, dropped more bombs, or activated the Reserves, the war

might well have been won.³ Indeed, as he began the Gulf War, George Bush told a national television audience that “our troops . . . will not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their back.”⁴

Such views, while attractive to large numbers of Americans, do not make good history. In fact, the United States, in its efforts to contain nationalism and Communism in Vietnam, employed a full array of military assets at its disposal. From the 1960s--when John F. Kennedy began to send in military personnel, helicopters, and approve the use of napalm and chemicals against the enemy, to the American withdrawal in January 1973, following the so-called Christmas Bombings just weeks earlier--the United States inflicted massive damage against Vietnam, both north and south of the seventeenth parallel. Indeed, American forces destroyed the land of their ally, the RVN in the south, as much as their foe, the DRVN in the north. Using its vastly superior technology, the American military pulled few punches in Indochina. In the decade prior to the end of the war, the United States dropped 4.6 million tons of bombs on Vietnam and another 2 million tons on Cambodia and Laos. American forces sprayed over 11 million gallons of Agent Orange, an herbicide containing dioxin, a cancer-causing agent, and dropped over 400,000 tons of napalm. The impact of such warfare was immense: over 9000, or about 60 percent, of southern hamlets were destroyed, as were 25 million acres of farmland and 12 million acres of forest. American bombs created about 25 million craters, many still containing active ordnance today. Most tragically, the Vietnamese suffered about 2 million deaths in the war, the Cambodians and Laotians had about 300,000 killed, and a greater number was wounded. And by 1975, there were 15 million refugees in Indochina and nearby countries. All in a nation roughly the size of New Mexico.⁵

Ironically, many of the men who were responsible for that warfare, senior military officers, had hoped to avoid such destruction. Vietnam was very much a civilian's war. Liberals in the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations made the crucial decisions to fight there and to constantly escalate the conflict. But from the 1950s on, a significant number of ranking military leaders had argued against war in Vietnam. They believed that it was not an area of vital importance to U.S. security, that the enemy had the capability to fight a long-term guerrilla war on its own terrain, that the allied government and military of the RVN was corrupt and weak, and that America's heavy firepower would be ineffective or counterproductive. At the same time, huge numbers of American soldiers--in Vietnam and on bases in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere--were suffering from low morale, discipline problems, drug abuse, racial conflict, or were actively involved in the antiwar movement.

The United States, then, dropped more bombs on Vietnam than used by all countries in World War II *combined*. At the peak of the war, it had over 500,000 soldiers in country and overall spent perhaps \$200-300 billion to wage war there. America's military leaders were divided and often pessimistic about their chances for victory, while maybe a majority of soldiers were stoned, angry at their officers or each other, or opposed to the war. To somehow conclude from these conditions that the United States "won" all the battles, or was not allowed to "win" by politicians and protestors at home, or fought with hands tied behind their backs, is a convenient and often popular alibi. An examination of America's motives, its role, and its actions in Vietnam indicates otherwise.

1. On American policy toward third world countries, see, among others, Walter LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions (New York, 1983); George McT. Kahin and Audrey Kahin, Subversion as Foreign Policy (New York, 1995); Thomas Paterson, Contesting Castro (New York, 1994); Richard Immerman, The CIA in Guatemala (Austin, TX., 1983); Piero Gleijeses, Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954 (Princeton, 1991); Robert J. McMahon, The Cold War on the Periphery: The United States, India, and Pakistan (New York, 1994); Mark Lytle, The Origins of the Iranian-American Alliance (New York, 1987).
2. Doonesbury strip of 21 July 1985, from Doonesbury Flashbacks: 25 Years of Fun, CD-Rom (Mindscape, Inc., 1995).
3. There are scores of books which express this type of revisionist viewpoint. Among the more important and well-known are Richard Nixon, No More Vietnams (New York, 1985); William Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports (Garden City, N.Y., 1976); Harry Summers, On Strategy (Novato, CA., 1982); Guenter Lewy, America in Vietnam (New York, 1978); and U.S.G. Sharp, Strategy for Defeat (San Rafael, CA., 1978).
4. Bush in Washington Post, 17 January 1991.
5. Statistics from The Nation, 18 February 1991, 184; Vietnam is 127, 000 square miles large while New Mexico is 121,000 square miles. By comparison California--156,000 square miles--is a bit larger, and Arizona--113,000 square miles--slightly smaller.