

The 1982 Lebanon War was Israel's Vietnam

Written by Caitlin Smith

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CAITLIN SMITH, NOV 27 2012

For the United States, the Vietnam War was a painful lesson in the misuse of the exercise of power, which left an enduring legacy imprinted on the psyche of the nation who had previously viewed herself as somewhat invincible. What then would be the consequences of such a conflict, on a nation whose very existence teeters precariously on its neighbours' perceptions of its strength? Major M. Thomas Davis (1985) argues in his essay, '1982: The Imbalance of Political Ends and Military Means' that the incursion in Lebanon in 1982 was to Israel what Vietnam was to the United States.

Vietnam was a war governed from start to finish by misconceptions, legitimised by deceit, characterised by military asymmetry and dissent; and ultimately, it was misconceptions which led to the failure of the USA to achieve its objectives in Southeast Asia. Lebanon and Vietnam possess almost indistinguishable characteristics and, such are their similarities, that an analysis of one could be applied to the other without contention; this essay will also assert that due to a number of factors including nation size, proximity of threats and regional instability, the legacy of Lebanon for Israel was much more profound than the Vietnam legacy was for the USA. This paper will analyse the parallels between Lebanon and Vietnam, and will be structured to cover the impact of misconceptions on their nature and conduct, in particular the failure of both governments to link political objectives to military strategy; this will be followed by an analysis of the impact and legacy of each of the conflicts on the USA and Israel.

The United States government arguably became embroiled in what was essentially an internal conflict in a distant nation because of a belief that their military superiority would allow involvement to be limited. The political nature of the war objectives is unquestionable: the prevention of a communist takeover in South Vietnam. In accordance with Clausewitzian theory, the critical misconception lay in the failure of the USA to adequately align military strategy with projected political goals. Although the objectives of the Israeli incursion in Lebanon in 1982 are dubious, Davis (1985) argues that not unlike the USA in Vietnam, the failure of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in Lebanon can be attributed to Ariel Sharon's mistaken belief that military might and technological superiority could reap political results. Davis (1985) contends that the greatest parallel between America's involvement in Vietnam and Israel's incursion in Lebanon was the 'imbalance of political ends and military means'.

Clausewitzian theory stipulates that war is simply an extension of policy; therefore simplification of war to military means is problematic because war should be guided by politics. In the case of Israel, the fundamental cause of this lack of association stems primarily from Sharon's (and to a lesser extent Begin's) deceit of the Israeli cabinet, which was used to legitimise the invasion. This meant that the true political goals of the invasion were never fully or openly articulated, resulting in poor channels of communication, and an unclear and indefinite parameter for success. Davis (1985) describes the war in Lebanon as a 'military scheme that promised itself political results, rather than a political strategy incorporating the use of military power', and the same can be said of America, who aspired to lofty political ends without careful consideration of the political situation of Vietnam, its history of imperialism or most importantly, the Vietnamese desire for autonomy.

Both invasions were instigated for purposes which stretched far beyond immediate security threats. Rather, their true intentions lay in the moulding of the ruling regimes of Lebanon and Vietnam in order to tip the regional political scales to their advantage; they had the ultimate aim of removing the threat of non-state political movements from another nation-state: in the case of the USA, the target was communism, and for Israel, the Palestine Liberation

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Organisation (PLO). The political goals to which Sharon aspired were much more complex than first appeared, hardly reducible to military achievements and based on misconceptions about Lebanese politics and society.

The Israeli cabinet had approved the Defence Minister's recommendation that the IDF enter southern Lebanon on June 6th, on the premise that the purpose of the large-scale invasion, 'Operation Peace for Galilee', was the destruction of the military threat posed by the PLO in the 40km zone north of the Israeli-Lebanese border. In reality, Sharon's plans involved the complete annihilation of the political infrastructure of the PLO throughout Lebanon, including Beirut (contrary to his rhetoric), and the installation of a pro-Israeli Phalangist government under Bashir Gemayel. Just as the respective US administrations during the Vietnam War had done with Diem, Sharon was placing substantial reliance upon the internal politics of a divided nation, and strategy and tactics were based heavily upon the 'illusion of Gemayel's power' (Schulze, 1999:63). Shlaim comments that, 'Sharon's Big Plan was based on a series of assumptions that collapsed like a row of dominoes when put to the test' (2001:421); the main test being the assassination of Bashir Gemayel.

The first parallels with Vietnam began to be drawn as casualties rose and Sharon's true intentions became clear, with individuals as well as politicians beginning to see the war as futile and an unnecessary sacrifice of human life. It would be erroneous to assume that the IDF and the US Army failed to achieve any of their objectives in these conflicts. Rather, the important point to note is that whilst both armies succeeded in winning battles by demonstrating military strength and superiority, which corresponded with the achievement of the original military goals, the large-scale political objectives could not be attained due to failure to incorporate political considerations into military strategy, resulting in both wars becoming more or less quagmires.

The 1982 Lebanon War and the Vietnam War were characterised in nature and conduct by military asymmetry and the assumption that military strength was the most important asset in war. Noam Chomsky (1983:242) cites the similarities between the nature of the two conflicts by stating that the military tactics used by Israel were 'familiar from Vietnam and other wars where a high technology modern army faces a vastly outmatched enemy'. Both armies found themselves fighting a war on unfamiliar territory and against an enemy that was often indistinguishable from innocent civilians, resulting in high Lebanese and Vietnamese civilian casualty rates and demonstrating the indiscriminate use of force.

Israel's security and defence doctrine has, since its inception in 1948, been based on the projection of an image of strength in accordance with the principle of deterrence, and historically Israel has placed a significant importance and reliance on firepower. Lebanon was a continuation of this policy, and the use of sophisticated weaponry including cluster bombs and phosphorous serves to support Israel's promise of 'massive retaliation' in the face of a security threat. In the same vein, the US incursion into Vietnam was a continuation of a policy of containment of communism, and neither state can be said to have broken from foreign policy doctrine. However, as both Israel and the USA were to learn, conventional firepower and excessive use of force are often useless against the threat of guerrilla warfare. Helmer (2007) attributes this failure to the development of a static concept of war that often develops in conventional military powers, in which no consideration is made of differences or change on the part of their enemies.

One of the greatest misconceptions regarding the conduct of the Vietnam War was the premise that 'a very high casualty rate (by American standards) would cause Hanoi to come to its senses' (Kristol, 1976:90). Rather, according to Kristol (1976:90), the Vietnamese perception that a 'long and bloody war would create discontent and divisiveness within American society' was in fact more true. This failure to consider the resolve of the host populations was also evident in the Lebanon War, with Abba Eban citing that the Israeli government placed weight on the assumption that the affected populations would press for an end to the hostilities, causing the PLO to surrender under pressure from the increasingly hostile Lebanese masses (Chomsky, 1983:182). Rather, as in Vietnam, the reality was the reverse. An increasing number of Israelis began to condemn the involvement of the IDF in what many saw as essentially a domestic Lebanese conflict, and what others saw as 'Sharon's War' (Schulze, 1998) – a war conducted to pursue the personal ambitions of Ariel Sharon (note the parallels between this association and applications of the term 'McNamara's War' to describe Vietnam [Mearsheimer, 1993]). Dissent and divisions within society began to grow, not least as a result of the sense amongst many that they had been misled with regards to the role that the IDF would play in Lebanon.

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Shlaim proposes that Sharon's deceit regarding Operation Peace for Galilee went further than the Knesset; rather it extended to his dealings with President Reagan, and more importantly, to the Israeli population (2001:401). Two decades previously, the American public had been correspondingly fooled by President Johnson and Defence Secretary McNamara as to the true nature and extent of the war in Vietnam, as well as being provided with a falsified pretext for full scale invasion- the Gulf of Tonkin incident- and the consequences of such deceit proved to be strikingly similar in both nations. It led not only to poor political and military strategy, but it paved the way in both the US and Israel for social, political and military dissent in the following years.

Operation Peace for Galilee, in its originally articulated version, commanded the support of a significant majority of the population of Israel, perhaps because of the proposed limited objectives and potentially advantageous political results; polls placed levels of support at 7/8 of Israelis (Helmer, 2007:59). However, as the objectives and scale of the war continued to evolve and increase, dissent and objection came to be a feature of the Lebanon War, with protests against the IDF in Lebanon reaching a peak in the aftermath of the Sabra and Shatila massacres, the impact being much the same as that of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. Rabinovich (1985:170) names Lebanon as 'Israel's most controversial and divisive war'. Membership of anti-war groups grew, including Yush Gvul, Mothers Against Silence and the Committee Against the War in Lebanon, and the war also provided fuel for the cause of the Peace Now movement, whose demonstrations in Tel Aviv drew in crowds of 400,000 (Tessler, 2009:583). This was the first time that an Israeli government lacked support during a time of war, and reports that soldiers of the IDF were beginning to question their command appeared to symbolise the futility of the conflict, and just as high desertion rates during Vietnam had done, public trust and support of the military waned significantly. The political implications in Israel included the resignation of Begin, the removal of powers from the Defence Minister and the growth of a political schism between the Labor and Likud parties; in the USA, the War Powers Act severely limited the ability of the President to commit troops abroad.

Although Vietnam and Lebanon undisputedly possess a wide range of likenesses, the legacies of each have differed somewhat. Joseph S. Nye (2002) contends that the proximity of a threat relates directly to a state's perception of that threat; Sharon and Begin perceived a pro-Israeli Lebanese government to be of vital importance to national security, and in a purely geographical respect, the emergence of the PLO as a credible political entity in a bordering state proves to have posed a greater immediate threat to Israel than a communist South Vietnam did to the USA. This may have had some bearing on the impact of the legacy of each conflict. In a similar vain, regional instability and Israel's threat perception with respect to its neighbours serves to increase the legacy that any failed war may have. It has often been said that due its geo-strategic position in the Middle East, Israel cannot afford to lose even one war, and the failure of its involvement in Lebanon certainly posed serious questions within Israeli politics and society.

Although Vietnam was a war of a much larger scale, with American fatalities numbering 58,000 whilst IDF casualties during the Lebanon War remain in the hundreds, when considered in relation to nation size and population, the losses incurred by Israel were possibly more damaging to society. Israel's entire foreign policy doctrine had to be questioned following the Lebanese quagmire, and whilst Vietnam certainly made the USA more wary about exercising the use of power in insurgent guerrilla conflicts for many years - 'Vietnam Syndrome' - America has always been aware of its predominance as the world's strongest nation.

Indeed, it is certainly clear that, to a great extent, the 1982 Lebanon War was Israel's Vietnam; however, significant differences in the nature of the USA and Israel as nation-states, in particular their geographic position, size and history, mean that each conflict had a differing legacy. Vietnam, to an extent, can be seen as a symptom of an evolving and more politically aware American society, whereas the 1982 Lebanon War served to act as a catalyst for political and social change, largely characterised by a move towards the political left, and a marked decrease in positive proclamations of the use of conventional military force.

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The 1982 Lebanon War was Israel's Vietnam

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