

Has the US Learned from Its Experience in the Vietnam War?

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CHARLES SLADDIN, FEB 21 2020

The United States' (US) involvement in the Vietnam War has gained notoriety within the nation's collective memory, and rightly so. Spanning twenty years and costing the lives of 58,220 Americans (US National Archives, 2018), its legacy is "protracted, costly and divisive" (Zhang, 2018, p. 244). Whilst there is still debate surrounding US involvement in Vietnam, we argue there is a consensus on the need for lessons to be learnt from its involvement. However, it is apparent that despite its legacy, successive administrations have failed to do so. This is evidenced by a string of arguably unnecessary international interventions, conducted via questionable motives and means representing a repetition of operational and non-operational factors that undermined US policy in Vietnam.

The question above posits, a number of assumptions that require discussion and clarification. Firstly, the manner in which the question is written implies that questionable decisions were made. As such, this paper will adopt the assumption that mistakes were made that therefore provide learning experiences. Following this, the second clarification to consider is whether the US can and should learn lessons from Vietnam. Whilst debatable, we believe that possession of historical knowledge is a practical instrument of action, and "a power that guides the... future" (Acton, 1895, p. 3). It is clear to us, that not only can Vietnam serve as an "undisputed learning experience" (Fromkin & Chace, 1985, p. 723), but the government should take heed of these lessons so they stand as a warning to future administrations.

Vietnam has benefited from extensive writing from a range of disciplines. Fromkin and Chace (1985) focus upon the ability and potential benefit of learning lessons from historical experiences, like Vietnam. In their work, they credit the value of historical experience and the practical lessons that can be drawn from them, however, concluding that a lack of consensus upon Vietnam in general, prevents any lessons being learned from the conflict (Fromkin & Chace, 1985, p. 746). The majority of writing on Vietnam and how it links into current US foreign policy focuses on factors that are more operational in character. Wright's writing (2017) demonstrates clear examples of operational lessons from Vietnam that can be mapped onto the US's current operations in Afghanistan. Interestingly, he is disparaging of the idea that historical experiences provide opportunities for learning and is thus wary of placing any such value upon them (Wright, 2017). What is clear from the existing literature is not only the significance of Vietnam's legacy but also initial attempts to demonstrate how current attitudes towards foreign policy have been shaped, operationally, by its legacy. Yet, what appears to be absent, is a direct analysis of both operational and non-operational factors that undermined US action in Vietnam and a demonstration that these same factors have reoccurred throughout successive foreign policy action frequently to the detriment of longer-term success. Therefore, this paper will argue that not only has the US not learnt from the operational and non-operational mistakes made in Vietnam, but its failure to do so has proved detrimental to recent international interventions.

Perhaps the most observable lesson the US failed to learn from Vietnam is the necessity for the right motivations to intervene in a conflict, as well as the necessity of a structured strategy and clear goals. US reasoning for intervening in Vietnam was clear, yet this does not detract from the inherent lack of sustainability in the perceived motives for doing so. Under the doctrine of containment, the goal was to prevent the spread of communism by preventing the fall of the guardian to Central Asia, South Vietnam (a policy enshrined in 'domino theory') (Powers, 1969, p. 855). The US's obsession with this doctrine and its stalwart determination to prevent the spread of this evil ideology led the

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Americans “deeper and deeper into tragedy” (O’Malley, n.d.) in Southeast Asia. Yet, what the US fails to comprehend is the reality that you cannot defeat an ideology with bombs and bullets (Robertson, 2015). Ideologies are a normative collection of ideas and ideals and, given their metaphysical nature, cannot be defeated by more traditional methods the US employs combatting its enemies, thus serving as an unsustainable and ambiguous justification for war. It appears US administrations of the last two decades are yet to appreciate this reality given the continued, and frivolous, use of ‘defeating Islamist extremism’ as rationalisation for its multiple wars on terror in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria (Lieven, 2018, p. 388). Trump’s proclamation across Twitter that “we have defeated ISIS in Syria” (Trump, 2018), only demonstrates further a false exaggeration of the US’s abilities to defeat an ideology and a total lack of appreciation for the lessons Vietnam could and should have taught them.

Similarly, the attempted methods employed to combat ‘ideological enemies’, particularly via ‘nation-building’ deployed in Vietnam, and now in Afghanistan, shows a failure to learn from its experiences. Whilst such efforts are commendable, the US’s efforts to help restructure in Vietnam via the ‘Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support’ failed to deliver “any effective nation-building” (Gawthorpe, 2014). Whilst the reasons for this are debatable, it should clearly serve as an appropriate caution for future administrations planning on utilising such methods. Yet when we examine the US’s now the longest war in Afghanistan, we see them again embarking on a futile mission to foster democracy and create a “functioning state” (Bandow, 2017) within Central Asia using a military force that is inherently incapable of creating a political culture or society. The ironic consequence of these attempts at nation-building is that, rather than helping discredit these fanatical ideologies, it abets the emergence of groups such as the Islamic State (Siddiqui, 2017) that simply drew the US back into the region in future conflicts. Clearly, the US has failed to learn from its own experiences, given its insistence on embarking on “morally ambiguous” (Herring, 2019) experiments in nation-building that only demonstrate the limited utility of American military power in conflicts that are political and ideological in nature.

A consequence of these previous two factors and a failure to learn from previous lessons is the frequency with which the US is drawn into unsustainable drawn-out conflicts following Vietnam. Certainly, one of the glaring oversights of America’s foreign policy in Vietnam was the lack of clarity in their strategy. Christened “the stalemate machine” (Menand, 2018), their flawed military and political strategy for the region not only cost the US any chance of success, but made what was perceived as an easily-winnable conflict into an operational quagmire. In Operation Desert Storm we see the same lack of long-term strategic thinking, a clear indictment of the fact that again lessons were not learnt. This failure is evident from the decision to end intervention unilaterally before Saddam had been chastened, condemning the US to a long-term, unavoidable presence in the Gulf to contain Iraq (Mahnken, 2011). The same is true in Afghanistan, where despite the end of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2014, 13,000 US troops still remain, continuing the ‘endless war’ which Trump repeatedly pledged to end (George, 2019). Likewise, in Syria, the lack of a succinct strategy has led to internal confusion and a struggle by even government officials to explain what US foreign policy is within the region (Borger, 2019). Ultimately, the use of containment as a doctrine for military intervention combined with ineffective and unsustainable strategies demonstrate a failure to learn from experiences in Southeast Asia, leading to successive foreign policy engagements that are little more than a Vietnam redux.

Clearly, the need to learn operational lessons from Vietnam is self-evident. What is perhaps less obvious are the non-operational lessons the US’s involvement has to offer. The most significant of these is the importance of maintaining high levels of public support for US international intervention. This was something that the US failed to achieve during the Vietnam conflict, demonstrable through the sizeable number of anti-war protests that occurred. Their effect undisguisable: dividing the American electorate to levels unseen since the Civil War (Herring, 2019, p. 104). Jump to 2003, and we see the same with protests against the unjust US intervention in Iraq, the discontent that only continued to magnify as the war continued and “American bodies piled up” (Siddiqui, 2017). The level of public frustration with the war is evident in the 10% decline in popular support for Bush Jnr one year after the 2003 invasion (Eichenberg, et al., 2006, p. 784), clearly demonstrating that the war was costing him. It would be easy to associate this public restlessness with the mere existence of US participation in the war. However, the absence of such a reaction during periods of previous conflicts (the Gulf War for example) indicates alternative factors specific to Vietnam and Iraq that triggered such a response. We have identified two indicators that not only explain the public reaction but clearly demonstrate a lack of learning on the government’s part. First, the justification for going to war, which for both Vietnam and Iraq was deemed not only illegal (Cox, 2003) but irrelevant to US interests, which is

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made clearer given our conclusions about using containment as validation for intervention. Second, is the government-orchestrated deceit surrounding both the motives and management of both conflicts. The leaking of the Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam conflict, and the revelation that Bush Jnr lied about the existence of WMDs in Iraq demonstrate why such discontent existed surrounding both conflicts. The fact that Bush's administration failed to learn from Nixon's handling of the situation in the 1960s, reveals another lesson not learned. Deceiving the electorate and showing a lack of appreciation for the significance of domestic support only serves to undermine an administrations' standing and decrease backing for intervention. This is visible when we examine the reaction to the news, in January 2005, that there were no WMDs in Iraq (Bryan & Hopper, 2005) sending Bush's approval ratings to an all-time low of 34% (compared to 87% in 2001) (Newport & Carroll, 2006). Whilst the disastrous approval ratings did not hinder Bush's 2004 re-election campaign, his legacy of leaving America in a seemingly never-ending War Against Terror exhibits the value of maintaining public support, a lesson the Bush administration could and should have learnt from Vietnam.

The US's determination to uphold its political standing on the international stage regardless of the commitments it draws them into, is the final lesson, in the context of this paper, that they have yet to learn. Predicated upon their innate belief in American exceptionalism, and the unique mission they perceive to possess, the US appears to harbour an obsession with the credibility that not only drew them into Vietnam but affirmed their decisions to intervene in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. This steadfast certainty in their unequivocal strength has created within multiple US administrations an inherent belief that there are no "limits to...American power" (Zhang, 2018, p. 244). Yet the disastrous consequences of intervention in Vietnam severely challenged this traditional American belief and the conviction that nothing was unattainable. Despite this, America is still explicitly subscribed to the idea that they are 'the world's policeman' (Trump, 2019). Explicit evidence of the very fact that they have yet to learn the lesson from Vietnam that an obsession with the unnecessary intervention will lead to nothing less than an inexorable commitment to long-term engagements resulting in a constant drain on "manpower, resources and international prestige" (Lieven, 2018, p. 388).

As this paper has attempted to demonstrate, it is clear that America still has a lot to learn from the conflict in Southeast Asia. A naïve commitment to a disproved doctrine of containment, an ignorant lack of appreciation for the value of public support and blind faith in their own exceptionalism clearly reveals that the ghost of Vietnam is still omnipresent. Its lessons are something successive US administrations are still yet to appreciate given their insistence in maintaining ill-fated and unsustainable foreign policy ventures. Thus, until America welcomes the lessons Vietnam has to offer, they will be condemned to repeat them, which will only prove more damaging as the years continue.

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