

17.40 / Stephen Van Evera
November 17, 2004

THE VIETNAM WAR, 1945-1975

I. U.S. DECISIONS IN VIETNAM/INDOCHINA, 1945-75

- A. 1945-46: the U.S. decides to allow the French to return to Indochina. Soon a communist-led Vietnamese rebellion develops against French rule.
- B. 1950: the U.S. starts aiding France in a big way against the rebels.
- C. 1954-56: France decides to give independence to Vietnam. The U.S. then decides to let the Northern half of Vietnam fall to communism but to try to create a non-communist Southern state. Toward this goal: (a) The U.S. blocks elections in the South because it fears the communist Ho Chi Minh will win. (b) In 1956 342 U.S. military advisers are dispatched to aid the Southern army against communist rebels (known as the Vietcong).
- D. 1961-1962: more U.S. military advisers go to Vietnam. They total over 9,000 by late 1962.
- E. October 1963: President John F. Kennedy decides to withdraw 1,000 U.S. advisers. He also seems to lean against committing U.S. troops to Vietnam. But President Lyndon Johnson reverses this view after JFK's November 22, 1963 assassination.
- F. Early 1965: Vietcong victory in the South is imminent. The U.S. intervenes massively to avert it. Thus large direct U.S. involvement begins. The U.S. starts bombing in February 1965 (Operation "Rolling Thunder") and sends large ground forces in July 1965. U.S. forces in Vietnam peak at 543,000 troops in 1969.
- G. January 1968: the Communist Tet offensive. The U.S. smashes the attack and badly weakens the Vietcong but the U.S. public misreads the Tet offensive as a sign of U.S. failure.
- H. 1969: the U.S. begins to withdraw and launches "Vietnamization"--it turns the war over to the South Vietnamese.
- I. 1970: the U.S. widens the war into Cambodia and Laos in an effort to deny sanctuaries to the Vietcong.
- J. 1973: a peace is agreed. The agreement allows North Vietnamese forces to remain in the South. Later in 1973, wrongly thinking the war is over, the U.S. Congress forbids U.S. bombing throughout Indochina.
- K. 1973-75: both Vietnamese sides break the peace. The U.S. then stands aside as communist forces seize the South and unify Vietnam under Hanoi's rule, April 1975.
- L. Total killed in the Indochina War during 1960-1975: 2,544,000. U.S. dead: 56,000.

II. THE FACTUAL AND THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS THAT MOTIVATED AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT

- A. **Containment, Version #1:** "The U.S. must stop communism in Vietnam to save France and NATO." (1945-48)
 1. "France's colonies make it stronger, hence a more solid NATO ally."
 2. "We must placate France on Indochina to gain its cooperation in NATO."
- B. **Containment, Version #2:** "The U.S. must stop communism in Vietnam to contain Soviet (or Chinese) expansion. A communist victory in Vietnam will enhance the Soviet (or Chinese) empire and tilt the global balance of power in their favor."
 1. **Proxy assumption**, 1949-75: Ho Chi Minh as Moscow's (or Beijing's) puppet.
 2. **Domino theory**, in 4 versions, 1953-1965.
 - a. "A communist-controlled Vietnam will send agents across borders to subvert neighbors."

- b. "A communist-controlled Vietnam will send armies across borders to conquer neighbors."
 - c. "A communist victory in Vietnam will inspire revolutions elsewhere in Southeast Asia, by showing that they can succeed and that the U.S. will let them succeed."
 - d. "A communist victory in Vietnam will position Vietnam to intimidate other Southeast Asian states into submission and alliance with Vietnam."
 - 3. **Strategic region assumption, 1950-1965.**
 - a. Southeast Asian bases matter; their transfer tips the global balance of power.
 - b. The West depends on Southeast Asian raw materials.
- All three assumptions--proxy, domino, and strategic region--must hold to tie the outcome in Vietnam to Containment. One or two are not enough.**
- C. **Credibility:** "Defeat in Vietnam will destroy the credibility of American threats and promises."
 - 1. Feared effects of lost credibility:
 - a. Others will disbelieve U.S. threats and promises, hence:
 - i. U.S. alliances may disintegrate because U.S. allies will doubt U.S. assurances, inclining them to cut a deal with the Soviets.
 - ii. The USSR may doubt U.S. resolve in Europe or elsewhere. As a result it may challenge the U.S. at more points; and it may underestimate U.S. resolve and overcommit, causing a U.S.-Soviet war.
 - iii. Nuclear proliferation will increase as states come to mistrust U.S. security guarantees and seek their own means of security.
 - b. Dominoes will fall via intimidation (see II B 2d, above).
 - c. Revolutions will be inspired (see II B 2c above).
 - 2. Credibility arguments passed through three phases:
 - a. Version #1 ("The Soviets are testing us in Vietnam"), 1945-1965.
 - b. Version #2 ("We have promised to defend South Vietnam"), 1961-75.
 - c. Version #3 ("We have paid costs, hence our reputation is engaged"), 1969-75.
 - 3. Prescriptions: John McNaughton ("We must suffer but needn't win") vs. Henry Kissinger ("We must win because we suffered").
 - D. **Domestic Backlash.**
 - 1. Electoral backlash version ("We'll be tossed out of office if we lose"), 1949-53, 1965-69.
 - 2. Weimar analogy version ("American society will witness a nightmare of recrimination if we lose"), 1969-75.
 - E. **Philanthropy.**
 - 1. Bloodbath theory ("Hanoi will slaughter Vietnamese non-communists"), 1969-75.
 - 2. Vietcong unpopularity assumption ("The VC are unpopular, hence their victory would be an undemocratic outcome"), 1964-75.
 - 3. North Vietnamese aggression postulate ("This is a war of aggression by North Vietnam against the South; hence a Northern victory would deny the South its right of self-determination"), 1964-75.
 - F. **"We can win,"** 1961-64--optimism about the military outcome.

III. THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT: DID IT FAIL? IF SO, WHY?

IV. ARGUMENTS AND EVIDENCE ON THE CASE FOR THE WAR IN RETROSPECT

- A. Regarding Containment Version #1:
 - Doves note** that France's empire was a drain, not an asset; and France needed US cooperation in NATO far more than the US needed France. The US could have compelled French cooperation without appeasing it on Indochina.
- B. Regarding Containment Version #2, Proxy theory:

Hawks note that:

- Hanoi became a loyal Soviet ally, 1979ff. Vietnam gave the Soviets a large naval base at Cam Ranh Bay. The proxy prediction was thus fulfilled.
- The Soviet Union and China gave the Vietnamese Communist movement large aid. This aid showed their ownership of the Vietnamese.
- Ho Chi Minh was trained in Moscow as a Comintern agent in the 1920s.

Doves note that:

- Ho Chi Minh sought to get the U.S. into the Pacific war in 1941 and later asked the U.S. to make Vietnam an American protectorate like the Philippines. This showed Ho's willingness to cooperate with the U.S.
- Hanoi was hostile toward China during 1975-91 and aloof toward the Soviet Union during 1975-79. Hanoi did ally with the USSR after 1979, but U.S. and Chinese hostility toward Hanoi explains this alliance. Perhaps the "Proxy" assumption became valid after 1975 but U.S. behavior made it true--a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- The power of nationalism trumps ideology in modern times, ensuring that a united Communist Vietnam would be nobody's proxy.

C. Regarding Containment Version #2, Domino theory:

Hawks note that:

- Domino effects have clearly been observed elsewhere in world history, e.g., in Southern Africa in the 1970s, Central America in the 1980s, and Eastern Europe in 1989. This establishes the plausibility of domino effects in Southeast Asia.
- Cambodia and Laos fell to Communism in 1975. So dominos did topple in Southeast Asia.
- More Southeast Asian states might have fallen had the US not given them a 10-year breathing space to get their act together. Hanoi revealed its aggressiveness by invading Cambodia in 1979; had its other SE Asian targets been weaker it might have moved further.

Doves note that:

- Deduction flunks the cadre version and the conquest version of the domino theory. Subversion was made impossible by the inter-ethnic hatreds of Southeast Asia; and Vietnam lacked the military power to win a regional war of aggression against its major neighbors.
- Not many dominos fell after 1975. The big prizes--Thailand, Malaysia, Burma, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Australia, and Japan--all stood firm.
- Cambodia provoked Vietnam's 1979 invasion so this episode says little about Vietnamese aggressiveness.

D. Regarding Containment Version #2, Strategic Region assumption: Events don't test this proposition. It could be tested by a simple inventory of the assets of the region.

E. Regarding the Credibility theory:

Hawks note:

- The 1975 US defeat was followed by an upsurge of Soviet activity in the Third World during 1975-1980--in Angola, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia.
- Various thugs around the world, including Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, later cited the 1975 U.S. pullout from Vietnam as evidence that the U.S. would not strongly resist their schemes.

Doves argue that:

- Version #2 of the Credibility theory is false because:
 - a. The US had no obligation to defend South Vietnam under the SEATO treaty since that treaty was aimed at international aggression and the war in South Vietnam was mainly civil.

- b. The South Vietnamese voided any U.S. obligation to defend them by their political corruption and military incompetence.
 - Versions #1-#3 of the Credibility theory are falsified by history:
 - a. After 1975 NATO remained strong and nuclear proliferation didn't happen.
 - b. There was no upsurge of Soviet activity worldwide during 1975-1980--merely a relocation of activity away from Europe, the Mideast, and Southeast Asia and toward Africa and South Asia. And research by Ted Hopf shows that the Soviets didn't infer much from the U.S. defeat.
 - c. The Vietnam war itself drained American willpower--see e.g., the "Vietnam syndrome"--an alleged postwar U.S. gunshyness. This syndrome, if real, was caused by U.S. involvement in Indochina. So fighting in Vietnam did more harm than good for American credibility.
 - F. Domestic Backlash:
 - 1. Version #1 ("Electoral backlash") is not tested by events, but could be tested by looking at poll data.
 - 2. Version #2 ("Nightmare of recrimination") seems falsified by history. When the war ended it quickly vanished from the consciousness of an American public more interested in Star Trek, disco, and platform shoes.
 - G. Philanthropy:
 - 1. There was a bloodbath in Cambodia--two million were murdered by the communist Khmer Rouge--and millions fled South Vietnam in boats. But there was no mass killing in Vietnam. Doves argue that if the U.S. had left Indochina before 1970 there would have been no war in Cambodia, hence no bloodbath there either. But hawks answer that without U.S. intervention Communism would have spread still more widely in Southeast Asia, and that Communist governments are prone to commit bloodbaths.
 - 2. The Vietcong were unpopular after 1975 but probably had significant popularity in South Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s. See, for example, Eisenhower's admission that the Communists would have won a free election in 1956.
 - 3. After 1975 the North Vietnamese took over the South, suppressing all local institutions. No self-determination for Southerners.
 - H. Was victory possible? Doves note that the U.S. lost, but hawks claim that victory was in America's grasp in 1968. The Viet Cong were annihilated in the 1968 Tet offensive.
- V. EXPLAINING U.S. POLICY IN INDOCHINA: SIX CONTENDING EXPLANATIONS
- A. Marxist: "The U.S. sought to protect the global capitalist system."
 - B. Realist: "The U.S. sought to avert real threats to its national security."
 - C. Realist, misperception variant: "The U.S. sought to avert illusory threats to its national security."
 - D. Ego investment: "The war continued once it began because those in charge couldn't admit they were wrong."
 - E. Stalemate machine: "Each President sought to defer defeat until he was out of office."
 - F. Public ignorance: "Before 1965 the public knew too little about national security policy, and about Indochina, to make informed choices on Indochina."