

THE VIETNAM WAR, 1945-1975

The Vietnam War was the most hotly debated war in US history. Friendships and families were torn by the quarrel.

The key rationale for the war: US national security. Hawks claimed that defending South Vietnam from communism would serve US national security by serving the larger US policy of Containment of the USSR. Doves were unpersuaded. Did the war in fact serve Containment? Historians still disagree on this issue. You be the judge.

I. EVALUATING POLICY: METHOD

Address some or all of these questions:

- A. Were the theoretical beliefs that led policymakers to support the policy true or false? In short: judge the covering laws.
 - 1. As measured against realities as known with 20/20 hindsight.
 - 2. As measured against only realities that could have been known at the time.

> And if the covering laws are valid, are conditions needed for their operation present in this case?
- B. Were the factual beliefs that led policymakers to support the policy true or false?
- C. Were the results of the policy:
 - 1. Desired or undesired by policymakers?
 - 2. Good or bad? (As measured against your own standard of good/bad).
- D. Did govt decision making follow rules of science--were arguments assessed against logic and evidence? Or was it arbitrary?

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

- A. 1941-46: Japan takes Vietnam from France, 1941. The US then takes Vietnam from Japan, 1945. The US then fatefully decides to allow France to re-take Vietnam. Soon a communist-led Vietnamese rebellion against French rule begins.
- B. 1950: the US starts aiding France in a big way against the rebels.
- C. 1954-56: France decides to give independence to Vietnam. The US 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 US blocks elections in the South because it fears the communist Ho Chi Minh will win. (b) A communist-led rebellion begins in South Vietnam. (c) In 1956 342 US military advisers are dispatched to aid the Southern army against the communist rebels (known as the Vietcong, or "VC").

- D. The Soviet Union and China begin feuding, 1958-59. Their rupture becomes severe by 1964 and verges on war by 1969. Can US efforts to avert Chinese expansion in Southeast Asia still serve Containment?
- E. 1961-1962: more US military advisers go to Vietnam. They total over 9,000 by late 1962.
- F. 1963: France and many in South Vietnam favor resolving the civil war in South Vietnam by agreement to unify and neutralize Vietnam in the cold war. The JFK administration rejects this option, and ousts South Vietnamese leaders Diem and Nhu who favor it. (They are killed.)
- G. Early 1965: Vietcong victory in the South is imminent. The US intervenes massively to avert it. Thus large direct US involvement begins. The US starts bombing in February 1965 (Operation "Rolling Thunder") and sends large ground forces in July 1965. US forces in Vietnam peak at 543,000 troops in 1969.
- H. January 1968: the Communist Tet offensive. The US smashes the offensive and badly weakens the Vietcong but the US public misreads the Tet offensive as a sign of US failure.
- I. 1969: the US begins to withdraw and launches "Vietnamization"--it turns the war over to the South Vietnamese.
- J. 1970: the US widens the war into Cambodia and Laos in an effort to deny sanctuaries to the Vietcong.
- K. 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 US Congress forbids US bombing throughout Indochina.
- L. 1973-75: both Vietnamese sides break the peace. The US then stands aside as communist forces seize the South and unify Vietnam under Hanoi's rule, April 1975.
- M. Total killed in the Indochina War during 1960-1975: 2,544,000. US dead: 56,000.

III. FACTUAL AND THEORETICAL BELIEFS THAT MOTIVATED U.S. INVOLVEMENT

- A. **Containment, Version #1:** "The US must stop communism in Vietnam to save France and NATO." (1945-48)
 - 1. "France's colonies make it stronger, hence a stronger NATO ally."
 - 2. "We must placate France on Indochina to gain its cooperation in NATO."
- B. **Containment, Version #2:** "The US must stop communism in Vietnam to contain Soviet (or Chinese) expansion. A communist victory in Vietnam will tilt the global balance of power toward the Soviet Union (or China)."
- 1. **Proxy assumption**, 1949-75: Ho Chi Minh is Moscow's puppet; or is Beijing's puppet, while Beijing is Moscow's puppet.
- 2. **Domino theory**, in 4 versions, 1953-1965.

- a. **Subversion version:** "A communist-controlled Vietnam will send agents across borders to subvert neighbors."
- b. **Invasion version:** "A communist-controlled Vietnam will send armies across borders to conquer neighbors."
- c. **Inspiration version:** "A communist victory in Vietnam will inspire revolutions elsewhere in Southeast Asia, by showing that they can succeed and that the US will let them succeed."
- d. **Intimidation version:** "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. Vietnam had no industrial power or other assets of strategic value. But if assumptions B2 and B3 (the Domino theory and the Strategic Region assumption) are true, Vietnam nevertheless is a power-asset, as the outcome in Vietnam would decide who owned other strategically important places.

All three assumptions--proxy, domino, and strategic region--had to 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 US threats and promises elsewhere, e.g., the US threat to defend Europe from Soviet attack."

- 1. Feared effects of lost credibility:
 - a. Others will disbelieve US threats and promises, hence:
 - i. NATO or other US alliances may disintegrate because US allies will doubt US assurances, inclining them to cut a deal with the Soviets.
 - ii. The USSR may doubt US resolve in Europe or elsewhere. As a result it may challenge the US at more points; and it may underestimate US resolve and over-commit, causing a US-Soviet war.
 - iii. Nuclear proliferation will increase as Germany, Japan and other states come to mistrust US security guarantees and seek their own means of security.
 - b. Dominoes will fall via intimidation (see III B 2d, above).
 - c. Revolutions will be inspired (see III 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.

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

V. EVALUATING ARGUMENTS FOR THE VIETNAM WAR

To evaluate the US war policy, ask: What should we see in the historical record if the hawks were right? If the doves were right? Then ask: are the predictions of each viewpoint congruent or incongruent with the evidence?

A. Regarding Containment Version #1:

Doves note that Vietnam was a millstone, not an asset, for France; and France needed US cooperation in NATO far more than the US needed France. The US could have compelled France's cooperation without appeasing it on Indochina.

B. Regarding Containment Version #2, Proxy theory:

Hawks note that:

- Hanoi became a loyal Soviet ally, 1979-1991. Vietnam gave the Soviets a large naval base at Cam Ranh Bay.
- The Soviet Union and China gave the Vietnamese Communist movement large aid.
- Ho Chi Minh was trained in Moscow as a Comintern agent in the 1920s.

Hawks say these empirical observations signal a master-servant relationship between the USSR and the Vietnamese communists.

Doves note that:

- 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 US and Chinese hostility

toward Hanoi explains this alliance. Perhaps the "proxy" assumption became valid after 1975 but US behavior made it true--it was a self-fulfilling prophecy.

- Ho Chi Minh sought to get the US into the Pacific war in 1941 and later asked the US to make Vietnam a US protectorate like the Philippines. This showed Ho's willingness to cooperate with the US.
- The power of nationalism trumps ideology in modern times. This ensured 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. The intense inter-ethnic hatreds of Southeast Asia made the operation of Vietnamese cadre in other countries impossible; 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.
- Several thugs around the world, including Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, later cited the 1975 US pullout from Vietnam as evidence that the US 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 US 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 US defeat.
 - c. The Vietnam war itself drained American willpower--see e.g., the "Vietnam syndrome"--an alleged postwar US gunshyness. This syndrome, if real, was caused by US involvement in Indochina. So fighting in Vietnam did more harm than good for US 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 in Vietnam no bloodbath happened--some 40,000 people died in work camps but there was no mass killing. Doves argue that if the US had left Indochina before 1970 there would have been no war in Cambodia, hence no bloodbath there either. But hawks answer that without US 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. President Eisenhower once stated 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 US lost, but hawks claim that victory was in America's grasp in 1968. The Viet Cong were decimated in the 1968 Tet offensive.

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