CHAPTER
1

Vietnam and America: An Introduction

America's longest war, the Vietnam conflict also was one of its most divisive. As American troop levels swelled to over half a million by the late 1960s, American society split sharply over the morality and efficacy of the war effort. The war's inconclusiveness and unpopularity spawned not only a broad-based antiwar movement but also a reexamination of America's purpose as wrenching and far reaching as any other since the Civil War. Neither President Richard M. Nixon's decision in 1969 to begin withdrawing U.S. troops nor the fall of Saigon to the communists in April 1975 did much to resolve the debate or ease the traumas that it unleashed.

The selections in this opening chapter explore the larger boundaries of that debate by focusing on the following questions: Why did the United States intervene in Vietnam: to defend freedom and liberty or to protect imperial interests dictated by America's world position? What did the United States seek to accomplish in Vietnam? Were its goals attainable? Who were its enemies? its allies? Can U.S. actions there be characterized as moral—or immoral? In the larger scope of U.S., Asian, and world history, how should the Vietnam War be interpreted and judged?

✕ *ESSAYS*

In the first essay, Leslie H. Gelb, a prominent journalist and former assistant secretary of state, and Richard K. Betts of the Brookings Institution summarize and critique the various interpretations analysts have offered to explain U.S. involvement in Vietnam. They conclude that the decision-making system actually worked far better than most of its critics realize. It worked, they believe, because it achieved its stated purpose of preventing a communist victory in Vietnam until the U.S. domestic consensus shifted in 1974–1975.

In the next essay, Norman Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary* and author of numerous books about contemporary American society, insists that the United

States went into Vietnam for idealistic, not selfish, reasons: to save the southern half of Vietnam from the evils of communism. He finds vindication for the moral soundness of America's commitment in the "hideous consequences" for the Vietnamese people of the U.S. defeat.

The final essay offers a radical perspective on the origins and consequences of the war. Gabriel Kolko of York University (Toronto) sees U.S. intervention as an essential part of Washington's overall strategy for guiding and integrating the world's political and economic system. He contends that America's defeat exposed the limitations of modern arms and armies against the force of revolutionary nationalism, making the Vietnam War one of this century's seminal events.

The System Worked

LESLIE H. GELB AND RICHARD K. BETTS

Writing history, especially history as recent and controversial as the Vietnam War, is a treacherous exercise. One picks away at the debris of evidence only to discover that it is still alive, being shaped by bitterness and bewilderment, reassurances and new testimony. Consequently answers to certain questions will forever remain elusive. Were U.S. leaders right or wrong in involving the nation in Vietnam? Did they adopt the best strategy for fighting the war? Were they genuinely seeking a compromise peace? Each succeeding generation of historians will produce its own perspective on the rights and wrongs of the war, and each perspective will be different from the others. This has happened with every other war, and it will happen with Vietnam.

What the historian can legitimately seek to do at this point is to begin to piece together the whats and whys. What were the patterns that characterized the war in Vietnam? What policy dilemmas did U.S. leaders face? Why were their choices indeed dilemmas? Why did they choose the way they did?

Four basic and recurring patterns marked what was happening in Vietnam from 1947 to 1969.

The first pattern was that of the French, the Saigon government, and their military forces. The military forces always got better, but they never got good enough. Each Vietminh or North Vietnamese offensive, whatever the immediate results, showed again and again that first the French and then the Saigon forces could not defend themselves without ever larger doses of massive American assistance. (The invasion of South Vietnam by the North Vietnamese across the demilitarized zone in 1972 was a partial exception.) These anti-Communist forces could never translate their advantages in total air superiority, dominance in mobility and firepower, and a sizable edge in manpower into victory. In fact they spent most of the time on the defensive until mid-1968. Something was wrong somewhere. Something always was wrong.

Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1979), pp. 9–26. Reprinted by permission.

Military power without political cohesiveness and support is an empty shell. The non-Communist Vietnamese, to be sure, invariably had a solid strike against them: it could not be an easy task to coalesce the forces of nationalism while depending militarily on the French or the Americans. Yet the non-Communist groups never were able to submerge their own differences in a single, unified purpose and to gather support from the peasant masses. Before the end, the regime of President Nguyen Van Thieu gained in stability but seemingly not in legitimacy. Without this legitimacy—and the quest for it seemed never-ending—the anti-Communist Vietnamese perpetually required American support.

A second pattern characterized the Vietminh and later the Hanoi government. While the annual hopeful prediction was that the Communists were about to expire, their will to fight seemed undiminished and they kept coming back. When the going got rough in Vietnam, they would divert temporarily to Laos and Cambodia. One need not glorify the Communists to face this fact. The brutality of their methods of warfare matched, if not exceeded, Saigon's. And certainly Hanoi received massive doses of aid from the Soviet Union and China, although only a fraction of the aid the United States gave to France and Saigon. But something always went right for them somewhere.

The Communist leaders always had their differences, but they could put them aside in the pursuit of their goal of an independent and unified Vietnam. Although as dictatorial as their foes, if not more so, they were nevertheless able to organize and marshal their efforts effectively year after year. They were, in short, more *effectively* dictatorial than the Saigon mandarins, especially because after World War II they captured much of the banner of nationalism. The non-Communist nationalists never achieved the same degree of ideological cohesion, organizational discipline, and grass roots activism. For these reasons the Communists crept near to victory on several occasions.

Victory would have been theirs on these occasions had it not been for a third pattern—that of increasing American involvement. As U.S. involvement increased, appearing at times to raise the possibility of a Communist defeat, the Soviet Union and China would step up aid to their ally. Whenever one Vietnamese side or the other in this conflict was in danger of losing, one of the superpowers would step in to redress the balance. The war could not end as long as these outside powers wanted to keep their clients from losing.

The upshot was a fourth pattern—stalemate. From time to time negotiating initiatives were launched, serving only to emphasize that the war was basically a civil war in which neither side would risk genuine compromise. Each side tried more force. The other side would match it. The anti-Communist Vietnamese, though inefficient and corrupt, always had enough support and resiliency to hang on. The Communist Vietnamese, though battered, always possessed the determination to drive on. Death fast became a way of life in Vietnam as stalemate continued but the war got bigger.

Back in Washington, these patterns created, and were in part created by, the conflicting goals that posed a rack of interlocking policy dilemmas.

Stakes versus leverage. U.S. stakes in avoiding a Communist takeover in Vietnam were as great as the stakes of Paris and Saigon. Thus, occasional threats from Washington to "shape up or else" were never taken seriously, for leaders in Paris and Saigon realized that the United States stood to lose as much as they from withdrawal. As the stakes grew, leverage shrank. American goals and strength were therefore paradoxically a fundamental source of bargaining weakness.

Pressure versus collapse. At various times U.S. leaders believed that neither the French nor the South Vietnamese would undertake necessary reforms without hard pressure from Washington, and that pressing too hard might lead to complete collapse of the anti-Communist position. If the Americans pushed the French into granting genuine independence to Vietnam, France would have no incentive to continue the fight against communism and would withdraw. If the Americans pushed the Saigon government too hard on land reform, corruption, and the like, Saigon's administrative structure would become overburdened, its power base would be placed in jeopardy, and its ever-fragile unity might come apart. Thus the weakness of the French and the South Vietnamese was the source of their bargaining strength.

Vietnamese reform versus American performance. Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson each made clear that reforms would be a precondition for further U.S. assistance. Each violated his own preconditions. The dilemma was this: if the United States performed before the French and the Saigon government reformed, they would never reform, but if the United States did not perform first and the situation further deteriorated, reforms would become academic. Thus at the end of 1964 American leaders concluded that the Saigon government was too precarious to warrant additional U.S. help but was unlikely to survive without it.

Involvement or not—a loss either way. U.S. strategists recognized over the years that greater involvement by outside powers was sure to run against the grain of Vietnamese nationalism, thereby making the war unwinnable. Eisenhower realized that getting further involved in France's colonial war was a losing proposition. Kennedy saw in 1961 that sending in American combat troops and making the American presence more visible could only transform the situation into "a white man's war," again a losing proposition. But Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the other presidents also believed that France and Saigon were certain to fail without greater U.S. involvement.

Restraint versus signals. U.S. leaders correctly calculated that increasing American involvement in Vietnam would trigger heightened domestic criticism of the war. Thus each President sought to postpone and then to downplay escalatory actions or even to conceal the significance of those actions as long as possible. But at the same time, they calculated with equal correctness that restraint for domestic political purposes would convey the wrong signal to the Vietminh, Hanoi, and their supporters. It could

only be read by the Communists as a sign of U.S. weakness and ultimate irresolution.

The damned if do, damned if don't dilemma. At bottom, the presidents acted as if they were trapped no matter what they did. If they escalated to avoid defeat, they would be criticized. If they failed to escalate, they would be criticized for permitting defeat. Theirs was the most classic of all dilemmas: they were damned if they did and damned if they didn't. There seemed to be no course of action that would not risk domestic support, although until 1968 criticism for softness seemed less bearable than criticism for excessive involvement. The dilemma lay not only in balancing left-wing domestic constituencies against right-wing ones, but also in the contradictory demands of the Right. Republican rightists at various times criticized Democrats both for being the "war party" *and* for "selling out" countries to communism.

In sum, given the constant goal of a non-Communist South after the Korean War, these six U.S. dilemmas in Vietnam melded into three historically phased ones. At first, U.S. leaders realized that there was no chance of defeating the Vietminh unless France granted true independence to Vietnam, but that if France did so, it would not remain and fight the war. So the United States could not win with France and could not win without it. Then American leaders recognized that although President Ngo Dinh Diem was losing the support of the people, he nevertheless represented the only hope of future political stability. So the United States could not win with Diem and could not win without him. Later the American view was that the Saigon regime would not reform with U.S. aid and could not survive without massive U.S. involvement, and that the North Vietnamese effort seemed able to survive despite U.S. efforts. Once again, the war could neither be won with U.S. help nor without it. Why, then, did the United States continue throughout these phases to put its resources into an ever-expanding *and* never-ending war?

Nations at war and after a war, win or lose, try to scratch away at the traditions or values that hold their societies together to see what they are made of. Are they wise and just nations? Or are they foolish and aggressive? Merciless or humane? Well led or misled? Vital or decadent? Hopeful or hopeless? It is arguable whether a society should indulge in such self-scrutiny. Societies are, as Edmund Burke wrote, "delicate, intricate wholes" that are more easily damaged than improved when subjected to the glare of grand inquisitors.

But in the case of the United States and the war in Vietnam, many people have sought answers to which they are entitled, and many others are only too eager to fill in the blanks. The families and friends of those who were killed and wounded want to know whether it was worth it. This answer is clear to most by now: No. Intellectuals still want to know "Why Vietnam?" Policy analysts want to know whether the failure was conceptual and strategic (the realm of ends) or organizational and operational (the realm of means). The answers to these questions will themselves become

political facts and forces, shaping the U.S. role in the world and the lives of Americans at home for years to come.

Central to this inquiry are the wide-ranging explanations of U.S. involvement given in the Vietnam War literature. Nine seem to stand out. Different authors combine them in different ways, although none presents a complete answer. The nine basic explanations are as follows:

1. The arrogance of power—idealistic imperialism. Richard Hofstadter has argued that Americans have had a misleading historical experience with warfare and that unlike the Europeans, they have not learned to live with minor setbacks and limited successes, since they have known only victory. This led to the "illusion of American omnipotence" in U.S. foreign policy.

This view holds that a driving force in American involvement in Vietnam was that the United States is a nation of enormous power and, like comparable nations in history, sought to use this power at every opportunity. To have power is to want to employ it and, eventually, is to be corrupted by it. The arrogance derived from the belief that to have power is to be able to do anything. It was also an idealistic arrogance, an imperialism more ingenuous than malevolent, a curious blend of Wilsonianism and realpolitik that sought to make the world safe for democracy even if this meant forcing Vietnam to be free. Power invokes right and justifies itself. Vietnam was there, a challenge to this power and an opportunity for its exercise, and no task was beyond accomplishment.

2. The rapacity of power: economic imperialism. This explanation, a variant of the domestic politics interpretation given below, is that special-interest groups, such as the industrial and financial elite, maneuvered the United States into war. This elite's goal was to capture export markets and natural resources at public expense for private economic gain. Gabriel Kolko's neo-Marxist analyses are the best examples of this approach.

Michael Klare, mixing the power elite model of C. Wright Mills with the economic determinism of Noam Chomsky, put the argument this way: U.S. policy in general and U.S. intervention in Vietnam in particular were "the predictable outcome of an American drive to secure control over the economic resources of the non-Communist world." American businessmen held key posts in the executive branch. Senators, congressmen, academics, scientists, think-tankers, and the military were their hirelings. They all longed for the almighty dollar. They could not make enough "honest dollars" in the United States, so they enlisted the power of Washington to guarantee foreign markets for the export of goods and capital and access to raw materials. They hoodwinked the rest of the nation into believing that the protection of their profits was in the U.S. national interest. They needed military capability. The military-industrial complex responded with sensors, defoliants, automatic battlefields, helicopters, and the like, and tested them in the laboratory of Vietnam. Put it all together with an adversary who would do everything he could to resist, and you have a war without end.

3. Bureaucratic politics. There are several, not mutually exclusive, approaches within this view. One, a quasi-Freudian version, has it that

national security bureaucrats—the professionals who make up the military services, civilians in the Defense Department, the Agency for International Development, the State Department, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—are afflicted with the curse of machismo, the need to assert and prove manhood and toughness. This instinct compounded misunderstanding and organizational failure. The bureaucrats' career advancement and acceptability within the government depended on showing that they were not afraid to propose the use of force. Another more conspiratorial approach has it that bureaucrats purposefully misled their superiors about the situation in Vietnam and carefully constructed policy alternatives so as to circumscribe their choices, thus forcing further involvement in Vietnam.

The first approach has been set forth by Richard Barnet and James C. Thomson, Jr. According to Barnet, the national security manager quickly learns that "toughness is the most highly prized virtue." Thomson drove the point home: "Those who doubted our role in Vietnam were said to shrink from the burdens of power, the obligations of power, the uses of power, the responsibility of power. By implication such men were soft-headed and effete." Citing the lack of informed judgment on Indochina because of the "banishment of real expertise" on Asia, the "domestication of dissenters," the "effectiveness trap" whereby bureaucrats refrain from protesting for fear of losing their influence, the "curator mentality," and "bureaucratic detachment" from moral isues, Thomson observed that the conflict was bound to lead to "a steady give-in to pressures for a military solution."

Of the second approach, Stavins, Barnet, and Raskin noted:

> The deliberate inflation and distortion of issues in the advocacy process leads to what I call the bureaucratic model of reality . . . the final purpose of which is to induce the President to do something or to make him feel comfortable about something the bureaucracy has already done. . . . The shrewd adviser tailors his advice to the President's prejudices as best he knows them.

David Halberstam emphasized this bureaucratic duplicity, particularly in regard to the role of military reporting from the field in the early 1960s. A similar variant of bureaucratic politics is posed by the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars: "The Indochina war is in large part a product of sheer institutional momentum." According to this interpretation, bureaucrats develop a stake in their solution to a problem; a change in the solution is difficult because it means a repudiation of a previous chain of decisions and is therefore an admission of personal failing in the past. As another analyst argued, the crisis managers advising the President became so involved they "would not, perhaps could not, let go." This fairly unified vision of bureaucracy contrasts with a fourth and final view of organizational determinism: bureaucratic bargaining. In this explanation the cautious approach of the State Department and the CIA gradually lost out in the councils of decision to the arguments of the professional military.

4. *Domestic politics*. This explanation is quite complicated, and authors

argue their cases on several different levels. The magnanimous view sees American presidents fending off the Communists in Vietnam in order to save the country from another round of right-wing McCarthyism and to retain domestic support for a continuing U.S. role in the world. Chroniclers who have been close to presidents have stressed this interpretation.

Another more complex portrait was sketched by Daniel Ellsberg, who saw domestic politics as putting U.S. leaders in a bind between two conflicting imperatives: "Rule 1 . . . *Do not lose the rest of Vietnam to communist control before the next election,*" and "Rule 2 . . . *Do not commit U.S. ground troops to a land war in Asia, either.*" The former drove the presidents on and the latter constrained them. The presidential rule that "*this is a bad year for me to lose Vietnam to Communism,*" said Ellsberg, along with rules 1 and 2,

> amounts to a *recurrent* formula for calculating Presidential decisions on Vietnam realistically, given inputs on alternatives, any time from 1950 on. The mix of motives behind this judgment can vary with circumstances and Presidents, but since 1950 a variety of domestic political considerations have virtually always been present. These have been *sufficient* underpinning even in those years when . . . "strategic" concerns were not also urgent.

These constraints can also be seen as reinforced by the underlying urge, especially in Johnson's case, not to be "the first President to lose a war."

5. Pragmatic security managers. This interpretation is closely linked to the bureaucratic and arrogance-of-power explanations. It is the view that U.S. leaders over the years were not inspired by any particular ideology but were essentially pragmatists weighing the evidence and looking at each problem on its merits. According to this perspective, these leaders knew they were facing tough choices, and their decisions always were close ones. But having decided 51 to 49 to go ahead, they tried to sell and implement their policies 100 percent.

Pragmatists are problem-solvers, and in the words of Joseph Kraft: "The war is peculiarly the war of the Whiz Kids and their friends and supporters in the liberal, business, and academic community. It is the war of those of us who thought we could manage force, and tune violence finely."

6. Ethnocentricity and misperception. Some analysts emphasize the naiveté and insensitivity of policymakers who did not understand the significance of cultural differences, and who therefore did not see that America's Vietnamese allies would not and could not live up to U.S. expectations. Communist revolution in the context of Vietnamese society was simplistically and falsely equated with the earlier challenges in Western Europe. Policymakers assumed that the stakes and solutions were similar, ignoring the complexity, uniqueness, and much greater foreignness of the Vietnamese setting. The United States failed in Vietnam because Americans thought they could treat it like any other Western country and were oblivious to the constraints of the traditional Vietnamese culture and character and to

the reasons for the vitality of Vietnamese communism. A related view is that which stresses misunderstanding of Hanoi's and the Vietcong's motives and the miscalculation of policy based on this misperception. Better anthropology and psychology would have helped. In short, had the United States really known who it was dealing with and had it really comprehended how *they* viewed the war, it would not have gotten in so deeply.

7. The slippery slope. Tied to the pragmatic approach, the balance of power, and the arrogance of power, but attributing more to the process than to the underlying assumptions, is the explanation that holds that U.S. involvement in Vietnam is the story of the slippery slope. According to this view Vietnam was not always critical to U.S. national security; it became so over the years as each succeeding administration piled commitment on commitment. Each administration not quite knowingly slid further into the Vietnam quagmire, not really understanding the depth of the problems in Vietnam and convinced that it could win. The catchwords of this view are optimism, miscalculation, and inadvertence.

The most vocal advocate of this thesis has been Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who in 1967 expressed it as follows:

> And so the policy of "one more step" lured the United States deeper and deeper into the morass. In retrospect, Vietnam is a triumph of the politics of inadvertence. We have achieved our present entanglement, not after due and deliberate consideration, but through a series of small decisions. It is not only idle but unfair to seek out guilty men. President Eisenhower, after rejecting American military intervention in 1954, set in motion the policy of support for Saigon which resulted, two Presidents later, in American military intervention in 1965. Each step in the deepening of the American commitment was reasonably regarded at the time as the last that would be necessary. Yet, in retrospect, each step led only to the next, until we find ourselves entrapped today in that nightmare of American strategists, a land war in Asia—a war which no President, including President Johnson, desired or intended. The Vietnam story is a tragedy without villains.

Schlesinger went on to say: "By continually increasing what the Pentagon calls the 'quotient of pain,' we can, according to the administration theory, force Hanoi at each new stage of widening the war to reconsider whether the war is worth the price." But "the theory that widening the war will shorten it . . . appears to be based on three convictions: first, that the war will be decided in North Vietnam; second, that the risk of Chinese or Soviet entry is negligible; and third, that military victory in some sense is possible" (at least in suppressing the resistance in the South). All these convictions, he concluded, were dangerous forms of illusion and self-deception. Marvin Kalb and Elie Abel agreed when they stated that America stumbled "step by downward step, into the longest, most costly, and most disruptive war Americans have ever fought, in the misguided belief that when things go wrong anywhere in the world the commitment of sufficient American dollars and—if need be—of American soldiers, must surely put them right."

Other writers have been less charitable. Bernard Fall, referring to Schlesinger's theory that "error creates its own reality," said that "it would not be unfair to state that the official reports on the situation from 1954 to the present depict a well-nigh unbroken series of seemingly 'unavoidable' decisions, all made with the best of intentions and for the noblest of purposes—but each gone awry at the last moment because of outside factors beyond one's control." He added, however, that "official reactions to warnings about the surely catastrophic end results of the course upon which the Saigon authorities—both Vietnamese and American—were embarked fell upon both deaf and resentful ears, as differences of view between the trained outside observers and officialdom became irreconcilable."

According to Theodore Draper:

> As a result of one miscalculation after another, we have gradually been drawn into making an enormous, disproportionate military and political investment in Vietnam. This investment—not the vital interests of the United States in Vietnam—has cast a spell on us. The same thing would happen if we should decide to put 500,000 troops in Mauritania or even Ruritania. Once American resources and prestige are committed on such a profligate scale, the "commitment" develops a life of its own and, as the saying goes, good money must be thrown after bad.

8. International power politics and containment—policing the world. The desire to maintain some perceived balance of power among nations is an explanation that is intimately related to that of pragmatism but places more emphasis on the traditional imperatives of international relations. According to Donald Zagoria: "For the Americans—as for the Russians and Chinese—Vietnam has been a pawn in a global ideological and power struggle." The United States, he said, was "intent—particularly after the Korean War—on drawing a Cold War line in Asia."

The principal considerations in pursuing the balance-of-power goal were seeing that "the illegal use of force" was not allowed to succeed, honoring commitments, and keeping credibility with allies and potential adversaries. The underlying judgment was that failure to stop aggression in one place would tempt others to aggress in ever more dangerous places. As the most powerful non-Communist nation, the United States had no choice but to serve as the world's policeman. Intervention in Vietnam, in this view, was not aggressive, adventurous, idealistic, or naive, but simply the ineluctable result of the American power position in the world, the same response that great powers have historically made to challenges from other powers.

Kalb and Abel, for example, noted that after Lyndon Johnson won his election, he *could* have considered changing U.S. policy. But he was determined not to lose Vietnam and thus rejected the possibility of a quiet withdrawal. "To him, that would have meant going back on the nation's pledged commitment." Townsend Hoopes described numerous times during the period October 1967 through March 1968 when pressures were brought to bear on the President that might have changed U.S. policy. But the President's reaction was that the struggle was a test of wills between

Washington and Hanoi and that the United States must not relent. Relenting was regarded as tantamount to a resounding defeat to worldwide U.S. policy and prestige and as a green light to the Soviet Union and China to foster more Communist wars of national liberation around the world.

9. Ideological anticommunism. The analysts who offer this explanation hold that anticommunism was the central fact of U.S. foreign policy from at least 1947 until the end of the 1960s. After World War II global competition between East and West began. An ideology whose very existence seemed to threaten basic American values had combined with the national force of first Russia and then China. This combination caused American leaders to see the world in "we-they" terms and to insist that peace was indivisible. Going well beyond balance-of-power considerations, every piece of territory became critical and every besieged nation a potential domino. Communism came to be seen as an infection to be quarantined rather than a force to be judiciously and appropriately balanced. Vietnam in particular became the cockpit of confrontation between the Free World and totalitarianism; it was where the action was for twenty years.

Hoopes, for example, observed that although the United States was confronted by a genuine and serious Soviet threat following World War II (and one aggravated in particular by the Korean War), unfortunately "the American response to the cold war generated its own momentum and, in doing so, led us . . . beyond the rational requirements of our national security." Anticommunism degenerated into a religious obsession despite numerous indications that the Communist bloc was no longer monolithic. U.S. aid to Vietnam continued to be based on the conviction that any Communist expansion threatened the security of the United States. The graduated escalation of the war, beginning around 1965, reflected the continuing influence of the cold war beliefs and resulted in wanton destruction grossly disproportionate to the goal sought.

Chester Cooper, in tracing the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam since World War II, showed how the anti-Communist strain evolved through the different administrations. The residue of democratic antitotalitarian militancy of World War II, directed against fascism, carried over into cold war anticommunism.

> The issue of the "Free World vs. International Communism" made decisions about international relations seem simple and, what is more, cast a mantle of morality and righteousness over all our actions abroad. The Soviet Union and its friends, by their deeds and their words, provided the spark that launched an American crusade to save the world from Communism.

Each of these explanations provides some insight into particular issues, particular people, and the workings of bureaucratic organizations at certain times. But however these explanations are combined, they are better as answers to the question of why the United States originally became involved and committed in Vietnam than as analyses of the process of involvement, the strategy for fighting the war, and the strategy for ending it.

The most prevalent and popular combination of explanations—pragmatic security managers, domestic politics, anticommunism, and slippery slope—is misleading in three crucial respects: it sees commitment as essentially stemming from involvement, the stakes building with each successive escalation—the simple investment trap model; it does not sufficiently emphasize the constraints in fighting the war, nor does it tie these constraints in a coherent way to the strategy of gradualism; and in stressing the factor of Washington's optimism about victory, it seriously distorts official American appraisals of, and expectations about, the war. Explanations 8 and 9, which see involvement as the rational product of given premises about the international balance of power and American ideals, are closer to the mark if any are. But Vietnam, according to most observers, is a story about how the U.S. system failed because the people who ran it blundered. According to this conventional wisdom the American leaders were a collection of moderate pragmatists and cold war ideologues who were trapped by their own philosophies and their ignorance of Vietnam. Pragmatists and ideologues alike foundered, so the stories go, because neither understood that Vietnam was an endless war, a quagmire.

Both stereotypes are compelling in some ways. The pragmatic one gives comfort to those who see where the United States wound up in Vietnam and conclude that no one could have wished this result. It must have been a mistake. The ideological one offers proof to those who look at Vietnam as one more act in the American drama about communism. It was necessary to fill the bill. These general pictures of blundering and blustering are also compelling in a sense as glimpses of the organizational minds of the State Department and the armed services.

Yet the stereotypes fail. They fail because the decisionmaking system they purport to describe *did achieve its stated purpose* of preventing a Communist victory in Vietnam until the domestic balance of opinion shifted and Congress decided to reduce support to Saigon in 1974–75—that is, until the consensus, and hence the purpose, changed and the United States decided to let Vietnam go.

The system worked. The story of U.S. policy toward Vietnam is either far better or far worse than supposed. Presidents and most of those who influenced their decisions did not stumble into Vietnam unaware of the quagmire. U.S. involvement did not stem from a failure to foresee that the war would be a long and bitter struggle. Vietnam was indeed a quagmire, but most American leaders knew it. Of course, there were periods when many were genuinely optimistic. But these infrequent and short-lived periods (late 1953, 1957–59, 1962 and early 1963, and late 1967) were invariably followed by deep pessimism. Very few persons, to be sure, envisioned what the Vietnam situation would be like by 1968. Most realized, however, that the light at the end of the tunnel was very far away, if not unreachable. Nevertheless, the presidents persevered. Given the international compulsions to "keep our word" and "save face," domestic prohibitions against losing, and high personal stakes, U.S. leaders did "what was necessary," did it about the way they wanted to, were prepared to pay the costs each

administration could foresee for itself, and plowed on with a mixture of hope and doom. They saw no acceptable alternative until 1968, when the President decided to deescalate, and again in 1974–75, when Congress decided to trim the aid cord.

[In summary, we advance three propositions.] The first proposition tells why and how the United States became involved in Vietnam. The second explains both why "winning" strategies could not be adopted and why the process of involvement was gradual. The third offers answers about expectations.

Proposition 1. U.S. involvement in Vietnam is not mainly a story of inadvertent descent into unforeseen quicksand but of why U.S. leaders considered it vital not to lose Vietnam by force to communism. They believed Vietnam to be vital, not for itself, but for what they thought its "loss" would mean internationally and domestically. Previous involvement made further involvement harder to avoid, and to this extent initial commitments were compounded. But the basic pressures, stakes, and objectives, and the judgments of Vietnam's vitalness—after the fall of China and beginning with the Korean War—were sufficient in themselves to set the course for escalation.

Proposition 2. The presidents, Congress, public opinion, and the press all both reinforced the stakes against losing and introduced constraints against winning. Until the summer of 1965 the presidents did less than those who were urging military victory recommended and rejected policies that could lead to disengagement—in effect they did what they deemed to be minimally necessary at each stage to keep Vietnam and later South Vietnam out of Communist hands. After the summer of 1965, as the war dragged on and the consensus began to dissipate, President Johnson remained a true believer and pushed for the maximum feasible, given diplomatic and domestic constraints as he saw them. Throughout, however, the presidents met the pressures of the system as brakemen, doing less than what they were being told was necessary for victory. While each President was one of the key architects of this consensus, he also was a part and a prisoner of the larger political system that fed on itself, trapping all its participants in a war they could not afford to lose and were unable to win quickly.

Proposition 3. The presidents and most of their lieutenants were not deluded by reports of progress and did not proceed on the basis of optimism about winning a near-term or even longer-term military victory. A feeling of pessimism characterized most of these men most of the time. Occasional optimism or flushes of hope that took temporary precedence over actual analysis only punctuated the general atmosphere of resignation. Policymakers recognized that the steps they were taking were inadequate to win the war and that unless Hanoi relented they would have to do more and more. In effect they chose a course of action that promised stalemate, not victory or peace. The presidents, at times, sought to escape the stalemated war through a negotiated settlement but without fully realizing (though realizing more than most of their critics) that a civil war cannot be ended by political compromise. Their strategy was to persevere in the hope that their

will to continue—if not the practical effects of their actions—would cause the Communists to relent.

A Moral and Necessary Intervention

NORMAN PODHORETZ

On April 30, 1975, when the last American helicopter scurried desperately off the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon as the city fell to the invading North Vietnamese army, the Washington *Post* said that it was a day of "deliverance" for the United States. In some sense, of course, it was. For nearly fifteen years, Americans had been working, fighting, and dying in Vietnam; and from this, surely, they were delivered on April 30, 1975.

They were also delivered from something else on that fateful day—something less bloody than the war itself but in some ways no less anguished and anguishing. This was the debate over the war that had been raging with an intensity that escalated along with American involvement, bursting from time to time out of the confines of words and ideas and arguments into the demonstrations, the skirmishes, and the more violent confrontations of what had come to be called "the war at home." Overnight, it seemed, Vietnam, the great obsession of the past decade and more, disappeared from the national consciousness. The newspapers and magazines and television stations carried what were in effect obituary notices, and the debate, along with the war that had provoked it, was then hastily interred in the forensic equivalent of an unmarked grave.

But of course nothing in history ever really happens overnight. In the case of the debate over Vietnam, by the time it was buried, it had long since lost its right to be called a debate. For at least the last five years of American involvement in Vietnam, hardly any voices had been raised in defense of our continued participation in the war. The arguments all came from the other side, and for the most part they remained unanswered. Entering office in 1969, Richard Nixon, like Lyndon Johnson in the last phase of his Presidency, spoke mainly of how to get the United States out of Vietnam. Rarely did he, or anyone else in those days, attempt to justify the intervention itself. Nixon had supported the decision of John F. Kennedy's Administration to go into Vietnam; he had supported the deepening of American involvement under Johnson; and then, by resisting the temptation to withdraw immediately upon becoming President, he had taken the onus of Vietnam upon himself, turning it (in an act that many thought foolish from the point of view of his own political fortunes) into "his" war. Yet he never really made it "his" war in the sense of defending it politically and morally. There was no point, he and his people kept saying, in arguing over how and why we had got into Vietnam; the only question was how

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best to get out. Thus what Nixon mainly did was defend his strategy of gradual withdrawal against the demand for an immediate end to the American presence. The effect was to concede the moral and political arguments to the antiwar forces—by now a coalition that included people who had led the country into Vietnam in the first place and were eager to atone by leading it out.

Even before April 30, 1975, then, Vietnam had become perhaps the most negatively charged political symbol in American history, awaiting only the literal end of American involvement to achieve its full and final diabolization. From a narrowly political point of view, it had become to the generation that had experienced it what Munich had been to an earlier generation: the self-evident symbol of a policy that must never be followed again.

Indeed, for many people whose original support of American intervention in Vietnam had been based on memories of Munich, Vietnam not only replaced it but canceled it out. To such people the lesson of Munich had been that an expansionist totalitarian power could not be stopped by giving in to its demands and that limited resistance at an early stage was the only way to avoid full-scale war later on. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, returning to England from the conference in Munich at which Nazi Germany's claims over Czechoslovakia had been satisfied, triumphantly declared that he was bringing with him "peace in our time." But as almost everyone would later agree, what he had actually brought with him was the certainty of a world war to come—a war that Winston Churchill, the leading critic of the policy of appeasement consummated at Munich, would later call "unnecessary." According to Churchill, if a line had been drawn against Hitler from the beginning, he would have been forced to back away, and the sequence of events that led inexorably to the outbreak of war would have been interrupted.

Obviously, Vietnam differed in many significant ways from Central Europe in the late 1930s. But there was one great similarity that overrode these differences in the minds of many whose understanding of such matters had been shaped by the memory of Munich. "I'm not the village idiot," Dean Rusk, who was Secretary of State first under Kennedy and then under Johnson, once exploded. "I know Hitler was an Austrian and Mao is a Chinese. . . . But what is common between the two situations is the phenomenon of aggression." In other words, in Vietnam now as in Central Europe then, a totalitarian political force—Nazism then, Communism now—was attempting to expand the area under its control. A relatively limited degree of resistance then would have precluded the need for massive resistance afterward. This was the lesson of Munich, and it had already been applied successfully in Western Europe in the forties and Korea in the fifties. Surely it was applicable to Vietnam as well.

When, however, it began to become evident that, in contrast to the cases of Western Europe and Korea, the differences between Vietnam now and Central Europe then were more decisive than the similarities, the relevance of Munich began to fade, and a new set of lessons—the lessons

of Vietnam—began to take hold. The legacy of Munich had been a disposition, even a great readiness, to resist, by force if necessary, the expansion of totalitarianism; the legacy of Vietnam would obversely be a reluctance, even a refusal, to resist, especially if resistance required the use of force.

For some of the older generation who rejected the tutelage of Munich in favor of the tutelage of Vietnam, the new pedagogic dispensation was generally limited to lessons of a strictly political character. When they said, or (less given to being so explicit) nodded in agreement as others said, "No More Vietnams," they had in mind a new foreign policy that would base itself on more modest expectations of American power than had prevailed in the years of Kennedy and Johnson. For them the main lesson of Vietnam was that the United States no longer should or could play the role of "policeman of the world." We had certain core interests—Western Europe, Japan, Israel—that we were, and must remain, committed to defend. But however desirable it might ideally be to undertake more than that, we lacked the power, the will, and the wisdom to carry out a more ambitious strategy with any hope of success. In this view, Vietnam represented the great cautionary argument against the "arrogance of American power."

In addition to humility about the extent of American power, Vietnam persuaded many, or perhaps most, converts from the school of Munich that humility was also required in defining the purposes for which this limited American power could and should be used. Even assuming that it might be desirable to contain the spread of Communism—and many by now had lost their former conviction that it was desirable—Vietnam showed that the United States was unable (or indeed unqualified) to go on making the effort with any hope of success. On this issue Vietnam was taken to be an irrefutable piece of evidence showing the folly of an ideologically based foreign policy in general and of an anti-Communist "crusade" in particular.

But these were only the blandest of the lessons of Vietnam. For, unlike Munich, Vietnam became the symbol of something much broader than a mistaken foreign policy. Especially for younger people who had no personal memory of the Second World War, Vietnam did not so much reverse the legacy of Munich as it succeeded to the legacy of Auschwitz. Only the most extreme elements within the antiwar movement took to spelling the name of the country as "Amerika," but many who shied away from so open an identification of the United States under Johnson with Germany under Hitler tacitly acquiesced in (if only by failing to object to) the idea that American involvement in Vietnam was an evil fully comparable to the evils done by Nazi Germany.

Sometimes the evil was taken to be the American intervention itself: an act of aggression against a people fighting to liberate themselves from a corrupt and repressive regime. Far from resisting the spread of totalitarianism, we were propping it up. We were the counterrevolutionaries, we were the imperialists, we were the enemies of freedom and self-determination.

As time went on, however, the emphasis shifted from the original "Amerikan" sin, the evil of the intervention, to the atrocities and crimes we were said to be committing in the fighting of the war itself. Within South Vietnam, the country we were allegedly trying to defend, we were uprooting villages, indiscriminately bombing and bombarding areas populated by civilians, defoliating forests and destroying crops, setting women and children on fire with napalm and other incendiary weapons, and committing random atrocities like the massacre of My Lai; and when, after 1965, we extended the war to North Vietnam, we became guilty of terror-bombing aimed at harmless civilian targets. All this added up to the great crime of genocide. Some Americans agreed with Europeans like Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell that the United States was deliberately "wiping out a whole people and imposing the Pax Americana on an uninhabited Vietnam"; others thought that the policy was not deliberate but that (in the words of the American writer Frances FitzGerald) it "had no other military logic" and that the results were in any case "indistinguishable" from genocide.

So well and widely established did this view become, and so halfhearted and ineffective were the replies, that the word Vietnam became serviceable as a self-evident symbol of evil even outside the context of politics. (Here, for example, was how it would later seem natural for a member of the Vietnam generation to speak of himself: "Sometimes my life seems like my own personal Vietnam policy. A rap sheet so heinous that I wonder why those hooded judges of my conscience did not condemn me long ago. . . .")

But within the context of politics, the idea that the American intervention into Vietnam had been a crime led, as we would expect, to sterner lessons than those that followed from the idea that the intervention had merely been a mistake. Instead of learning humility about the extent of their power, Americans were to learn renunciation. Until we could teach ourselves to intervene on the side of good—the side of revolutionary change—the best thing we could do both for ourselves and for the rest of the world was not to intervene at all. Oppressed peoples everywhere were rising and demanding their rights, and everywhere they encountered American opposition. The lesson of Vietnam was that the United States, not the Soviet Union and certainly not Communism, represented the greatest threat to the security and well-being of the peoples of the world.

Thus it was that by April 30, 1975, the debate over Vietnam had already been settled in favor of the moral and political position of the antiwar movement. At best Vietnam had been a blunder; at worst it had been a crime. At best it exposed the folly of trying to contain the spread of Communism anywhere outside Western Europe; at worst it demonstrated that we were and always had been on the wrong side of a worldwide struggle.

That the United States was defeated in Vietnam is certain. But did that defeat truly mean what the antiwar movement seems to have persuaded everyone it meant? Do the policies that led the United States into Vietnam deserve the discredit that has been attached to them? Does the United

States deserve the moral contumely that Vietnam has brought upon it in the eyes of so many people both at home and abroad? Is it true, as the German novelist Guenter Grass has said, that America "lost in Vietnam its right to appeal to morals"? The only way to answer these questions is to reopen the debate over Vietnam from which the United States was prematurely delivered in the closing years of the war. But before the political and moral issues can be properly engaged, it will be necessary to retell the story of how and why the United States went into Vietnam and how and why it was driven out. . . .

Here then we arrive at the center of the moral issue posed by the American intervention into Vietnam.

The United States sent half a million men to fight in Vietnam. More than 50,000 of them lost their lives, and many thousands more were wounded. Billions of dollars were poured into the effort, damaging the once unparalleled American economy to such an extent that the country's competitive position was grievously impaired. The domestic disruptions to which the war gave rise did perhaps even greater damage to a society previously so self-confident that it was often accused of entertaining illusions of its own omnipotence. Millions of young people growing to maturity during the war developed attitudes of such hostility toward their own country and the civilization embodied by its institutions that their willingness to defend it against external enemies in the future was left hanging in doubt.

Why did the United States undertake these burdens and make these sacrifices in blood and treasure and domestic tranquillity? What was in it for the United States? It was a question that plagued the antiwar movement from beginning to end because the answer was so hard to find. If the United States was simply acting the part of an imperialist aggressor in Vietnam, as many in the antiwar movement professed to believe, it was imperialism of a most peculiar kind. There were no raw materials to exploit in Vietnam, and there was no overriding strategic interest involved. To Franklin Roosevelt in 1941 Indochina had been important because it was close to the source of rubber and tin, but this was no longer an important consideration. Toward the end of the war, it was discovered that there was oil off the coast of Vietnam and antiwar radicals happily seized on this news as at last providing an explanation for the American presence there. But neither Kennedy nor Johnson knew about the oil, and even if they had, they would hardly have gone to war for its sake in those pre-OPEC days when oil from the Persian Gulf could be had at two dollars a barrel.

In the absence of an economic interpretation, a psychological version of the theory of imperialism was developed to answer the maddening question: *Why are we in Vietnam?* This theory held that the United States was in Vietnam because it had an urge to dominate—"to impose its national obsessions on the rest of the world," in the words of a piece in the *New York Review of Books*, one of the leading centers of antiwar agitation within the intellectual community. But if so, the psychic profits were as illusory as the economic ones, for the war was doing even deeper damage to the national self-confidence than to the national economy.

Yet another variant of the psychological interpretation, proposed by the economist Robert L. Heilbroner, was that "the fear of losing our place in the sun, of finding ourselves at bay, . . . motivates a great deal of the anti-Communism on which so much of American foreign policy seems to be founded." This was especially so in such underdeveloped countries as Vietnam, where "the rise of Communism would signal the end of capitalism as the dominant world order, and would force the acknowledgment that America no longer constituted the model on which the future of world civilization would be mainly based."

All these theories were developed out of a desperate need to find or invent selfish or self-interested motives for the American presence in Vietnam, the better to discredit it morally. In a different context, proponents of one or another of these theories—Senator Fulbright, for example—were not above trying to discredit the American presence politically by insisting that *no* national interest was being served by the war. This latter contention at least had the virtue of being closer to the truth than the former. For the truth was that the United States went into Vietnam for the sake not of its own direct interests in the ordinary sense but for the sake of an ideal. The intervention was a product of the Wilsonian side of the American character—the side that went to war in 1917 to "make the world safe for democracy" and that found its contemporary incarnations in the liberal internationalism of the 1940s and the liberal anti-Communism of the 1950s. One can characterize this impulse as naive; one can describe it, as Heilbroner does (and as can be done with any virtuous act), in terms that give it a subtly self-interested flavor. But there is no rationally defensible way in which it can be called immoral.

Why, then, were we in Vietnam? To say it once again: because we were trying to save the Southern half of that country from the evils of Communism. But was the war we fought to accomplish this purpose morally worse than Communism itself? Peter L. Berger, who at the time was involved with Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV), wrote in 1967: "All sorts of dire results might well follow a reduction or a withdrawal of the American engagement in Vietnam. Morally speaking, however, it is safe to assume that none of these could be worse than what is taking place right now." Unlike most of his fellow members of CALCAV, Berger would later repent of this statement. Writing in 1980, he would say of it: "Well, it was *not* safe to assume. . . . I was wrong and so were all those who thought as I did." For "contrary to what most members (including myself) of the antiwar movement expected, the peoples of Indochina have, since 1975, been subjected to suffering far worse than anything that was inflicted upon them by the United States and its allies."

To be sure, the "bloodbath" that had been feared by supporters of the war did not occur—not in the precise form that had been anticipated. In contrast to what they did upon taking power in Hanoi in 1954 (when they murdered some 50,000 landlords), or what they did during their brief occupation of Hué during the Tet offensive of 1968 (when they massacred 3,000 civilians), the Communists did not stage mass executions in the newly

conquered South. According to Nguyen Cong Hoan, who had been an NLF [National Liberation Front] agent and then became a member of the National Assembly of the newly united Communist Vietnam before disillusionment drove him to escape in March 1977, there were more executions in the provinces than in the cities and the total number might well have reached into the tens of thousands. But as another fervent opponent of the war, the New York *Times* columnist Tom Wicker was forced to acknowledge, "what Vietnam has given us instead of a bloodbath [is] a vast tide of human misery in Southeast Asia—hundreds of thousands of homeless persons in United Nations camps, perhaps as many more dead in flight, tens of thousands of the most pitiable forcibly repatriated to Cambodia, no one knows how many adrift on the high seas or wandering the roads."

Among the refugees Wicker was talking about here were those who came to be known as "the boat people" because they "literally threw themselves upon the South China Sea in small coastal craft. . . ." Many thousands of these people were ethnic Chinese who were being driven out and forced to pay everything they had for leaky boats; tens of thousands more were Vietnamese fleeing voluntarily from what Nguyen Cong Hoan describes as "the most inhuman and oppressive regime they have ever known." The same judgment is made by Truong Nhu Tang, the former Minister of Justice in the PRG [Provisional Revolutionary Government] who fled in November 1979 in a boat loaded with forty refugees: "Never has any previous regime brought such masses of people to such desperation. Not the military dictators, not the colonialists, not even the ancient Chinese overlords."

So desperate were they to leave that they were willing to take the poor chance of survival in flight rather than remain. Says Nguyen Cong Hoan: ". . . Our people have a traditional attachment to their country. No Vietnamese would willingly leave home, homeland, and ancestors' graves. During the most oppressive French colonial rule and Japanese domination, no one escaped by boat at great risk to their lives. Yet you see that my countrymen by the thousands and from all walks of life, including a number of disillusioned Vietcongs, continue to escape from Vietnam; six out of ten never make it, and for those who are fortunate to make it, they are not allowed to land." Adds one of the disillusioned who did make it, Doan Van Toai: "Among the boat people who survived, including those who were raped by pirates and those who suffered in the refugee camps, nobody regrets his escape from the present regime."

Though they invented a new form of the Communist bloodbath, the North Vietnamese (for, to repeat, before long there were no Southerners in authority in the South, not even former members of the NLF and the PRG) were less creative in dealing with political opposition, whether real or imagined. The "re-education camps" they had always used for this purpose in the North were now extended to the South, but the result was not so much an indigenous system of Vietnamese concentration camps as an imitation of the Soviet Gulag. (*The Vietnamese Gulag*, indeed, was the name Doan Van Toai gave to the book he published about the camps in

1979.) The French journalist Jean Lacouture, who had supported the Communists during the war to the point (as he now admitted) of turning himself into a "vehicle and intermediary for a lying and criminal propaganda, [an] ingenuous spokesman for tyranny in the name of liberty," now tried to salvage his integrity by telling the truth about a re-education camp he was permitted to visit by a regime that had good reason to think him friendly. "It was," he wrote, "a prefabricated hell."

In May 1977, two full years after the Communist takeover, President Jimmy Carter—a repentant hawk, like many members of his cabinet, including his Secretary of State and his Secretary of Defense—spoke of "the intellectual and moral poverty" of the policy that had led us into Vietnam and had kept us there for so long. When Ronald Reagan, an unrepentant hawk, called the war "a noble cause" in the course of his ultimately successful campaign to replace Carter in the White House, he was accused of having made a "gaffe." Fully, painfully aware as I am that the American effort to save Vietnam from Communism was indeed beyond our intellectual and moral capabilities, I believe the story shows that Reagan's "gaffe" was closer to the truth of why we were in Vietnam and what we did there, at least until the very end, than Carter's denigration of an act of imprudent idealism whose moral soundness has been so overwhelmingly vindicated by the hideous consequences of our defeat.

The Limits of American Power

GABRIEL KOLKO

The Vietnam War was the United States' longest and most divisive war of the post-1945 epoch, and in many regards its most important conflict in the twentieth century. Obviously, the Vietnamese Communist Party's resiliency made Vietnam distinctive after 1946, but that the United States should have become embroiled with such formidable adversaries was a natural outcome of the logic and objectives of its role in the modern era. In retrospect, it is apparent that there existed two immovable forces, one of which had no conceivable option but to pursue the policy it had embarked on, and that it was far more likely for America to follow in the footsteps of the French than to learn something from their defeat. How and why it made that momentous decision and what it perceived itself to be doing reveals much about our times and the social and political framework in which contemporary history is made. For Vietnam was ultimately the major episode in a larger process of intervention which preceded and transcended it. All of the frustrations and dilemmas which emerged in Vietnam existed for Washington before 1960, and they persist to this day. The only thing that made the Vietnam War unique for the United States was that it lost completely.

The hallmark of American foreign policy after 1945 was the universality

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of its intense commitment to create an integrated, essentially capitalist world framework out of the chaos of World War Two and the remnants of the colonial systems. The United States was the major inheritor of the mantle of imperialism in modern history, acting not out of a desire to defend the nation against some tangible threat to its physical welfare but because it sought to create a controllable, responsive order elsewhere, one that would permit the political destinies of distant places to evolve in a manner beneficial to American goals and interests far surpassing the immediate needs of its domestic society. The regulation of the world was at once the luxury and the necessity it believed its power afforded, and even if its might both produced and promised far greater prosperity if successful, its inevitable costs were justified, as all earlier imperialist powers had also done, as a fulfillment of an international responsibility and mission.

This task in fact far transcended that of dealing with the USSR, which had not produced the world upheaval but was itself an outcome of the first stage of the protracted crisis of the European and colonial system that had begun in 1914, even though the United States always held Moscow culpable to a critical extent for the many obstacles it was to confront. The history of the postwar era is essentially one of the monumental American attempts—and failures—to weave together such a global order and of the essentially vast autonomous social forces and destabilizing dynamics emerging throughout the world to confound its ambitions.

Such ambitions immediately brought the United States face to face with what to this day remains its primary problem: the conflict between its inordinate desires and its finite resources, and the definition of realistic priorities. Although it took years for the limits on American power to become clear to its leaders, most of whom only partly perceived it, it has been this problem of coherent priorities, and of the means to implement them, rather than the ultimate abstract goals themselves that have divided America's leaders and set the context for debates over policy. What was most important for much of the post-1945 era was the overweening belief on the part of American leaders that regulating all the world's political and economic problems was not only desirable but also possible, given skill and power. They would not and could not concede that the economic, political, and social dynamics of a great part of the world exceeded the capacities of any one or even a group of nations to control. At stake were the large and growing strategic and economic interests in those unstable nations experiencing the greatest changes.

The interaction between a complex world, the constraints on U.S. power, and Washington's perceptions, including its illusions and ignorance, is the subject matter for most of the history of contemporary American foreign policy. The "accidental" nature of that policy after 1946 was a consequence of the intrinsic dilemmas of this ambition rather than its cause. To articulate its priorities was quite simple. Europe was, and still is, at the top of the list of America's formally defined economic, strategic, and political interests. The dilemma of priorities was that none precluded others wholly, so that America's leaders never excluded intervention in any major

part of the world. In the last analysis, it was the sheer extent of its objectives, and the inevitable crises and issues which emerged when the process of intervention began, that imposed on the United States the loss of mastery over its own priorities and actions.

By the late 1940s the United States had begun to confront the basic dilemmas it was to encounter for the remainder of the century. The formulation of priorities was an integral part of its reasoning, and so was resistance to communism in whatever form it might appear anywhere in the world. Its own interests had been fully articulated, and these found expression in statements of objectives as well as in the creation of international political, military, and economic organizations and alliances the United States effectively dominated, with American-led "internationalism" becoming one of the hallmarks of its postwar efforts.

Describing the various U.S. decision makers' motives and goals is a necessary but inherently frustrating effort because American capitalism's relative ideological underdevelopment produces nuances and contradictions among men of power which often become translated into the tensions and even ambivalences of American diplomacy. But the complex problem of explaining the causes of U.S. foreign policy can never obviate a description of the real forces and considerations which lead to certain actions and to an optimizing of specific, tangible interests rather than of others. Complexity in serious causal explanations has existed since time immemorial and is intrinsic to the analytic process, yet the importance many care to assign to caprice and accident itself looks frivolous on closer examination of the historical facts and political options. There are, ultimately, main trends and forces, and these must be respected regardless of coincidental related factors.

Prevention of the expansion of communism, the "containment" doctrine, became formally enshrined no later than 1947, and in 1950 the "rollback" of communism was secretly adhered to in the famous National Security Council 68 policy. In 1947 the so-called domino theory first emerged in the form of the Truman Doctrine on Greece. Were Greece to fall, Secretary of State George C. Marshall argued in February of that year, Turkey might follow and "Soviet domination might thus extend over the entire Middle East and Asia." Later that year the same logic required the reconstruction of West Germany, lest its weakness create a vacuum of power into which communism could enter and thereby spread throughout Europe. An area was, by this calculation, no stronger than its weakest link, and the domino mode of analysis, involving interconnections and linkages in estimating the effects of major political upheavals, well before Indochina was becoming the first and probably the most durable of conventional U.S. doctrines on the process of change and power in the modern world.

Such perceptions led irresistibly to the official decision in mid-1949, when the Communists triumphed in China, to draw a line against any new communist states in Asia, even though Washington was then preoccupied with European problems. But in Indochina the interaction of European with Asian affairs was always important to American leaders, for France's

growing absorption with Indochina was causing it to veto West German rearmament, and the more quickly France won and brought its troops back home to balance projected German power, the sooner it could be brought into existence. No less crucial was the future position of Japan in Asia and in the world economy should it lose access to Southeast Asian raw materials and markets.

In a word, intervening in Vietnam never generated original international political dilemmas and issues for the United States. America's leaders clarified their ideas about dominoes, the credibility of their power, or the raw-materials system in the world long before their action on Indochina had more than a routine significance. It was precisely because of the repeated definitions of containment, dominoes, intervention, and linkages of seemingly discrete foreign policy questions elsewhere in the world that the United States made the irreversible decision to see the war in Vietnam through to the end. Even many of the purely military dilemmas that were to emerge in Vietnam had been raised earlier in Korea. Until well into the 1960s Vietnam was but one of many nations the United States was both involved in and committed to retaining in friendly hands, and from 1953 through 1962 it provided more military and economic aid to Turkey, South Korea, and Taiwan, about as much to Pakistan, and only somewhat less to Greece and Spain. Given its resources and goals, America was deeply involved throughout the world as a mattter of routine. This fact encouraged a new intervention to the extent that it succeeded in maintaining client regimes but could also be a restraint once the demands of one nation became so great as to threaten the United States' position elsewhere.

The domino theory was to be evoked initially more than any other justification in the Southeast Asian context, and the concept embodied both strategic and economic components which American leaders never separated. "The fall of Indochina would undoubtedly lead to the fall of the other mainland states of Southeast Asia," the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued in April 1950, and with it Russia would control "Asia's war potential . . . affecting the balance of power." Not only "major sources of certain strategic materials" would be lost, but also communications routes. The State Department maintained a similar line at this time, writing off Thailand and Burma should Indochina fall. Well before the Korean conflict this became the United States' official doctrine, and the war there strengthened this commitment.

The loss of Indochina, Washington formally articulated in June 1952, "would have critical psychological, political and economic consequences. . . . the loss of any single country would probably lead to relatively swift submission to or an alignment with communism by the remaining countries of this group. Furthermore, an alignment with communism of the rest of Southeast Asia and India, and in the longer term, of the Middle East (with the probable exceptions of at least Pakistan and Turkey) would in all probability progressively follow. Such widespread alignment would endanger the stability and security of Europe." It would "render the U.S. position in the Pacific offshore island chain precarious and would seriously jeop-

ardize fundamental U.S. security interests in the Far East." The "principal world source of natural rubber and tin, and a producer of petroleum and other strategically important commodities" would be lost in Malaya and Indonesia. The rice exports of Burma and Thailand would be taken from Malaya, Ceylon, Japan, and India. Eventually, there would be "such economic and political pressures in Japan as to make it extremely difficult to prevent Japan's eventual accommodation to communism." This was the perfect integration of all the elements of the domino theory, involving raw materials, military bases, and the commitment of the United States to protect its many spheres of influence. In principle, even while helping the French to fight for the larger cause which America saw as its own, Washington's leaders prepared for greater intervention when it became necessary to prop up the leading domino—Indochina.

There were neither private nor public illusions regarding the stakes and goals for American power. Early in 1953 the National Security Council reiterated, "The Western countries and Japan need increased supplies of raw materials and foodstuffs and growing markets for their industrial production. Their balance of payments difficulties are in considerable part the result of the failure of production of raw materials and foodstuffs in non-dollar areas to increase as rapidly as industrial production." "Why is the United States spending hundreds of millions of dollars supporting the forces of the French Union in the fight against communism?" Vice-President Richard Nixon explained publicly in December 1953. "If Indo-china falls, Thailand is put in an almost impossible position. The same is true of Malaya with its rubber and tin. The same is true of Indonesia. If this whole part of Southeast Asia goes under Communist domination or Communist influence, Japan, who trades and must trade with this area in order to exist, must inevitably be oriented towards the Communist regime." Both naturally and logically, references to tin, rubber, rice, copra, iron ore, tungsten, and oil were integral to American policy considerations from the inception. As long as he was President, Eisenhower never forgot his country's dependence on the importation of raw materials and the need to control their sources. When he first made public the "falling domino" analogy, in April 1954, he also discussed the dangers of losing the region's tin, tungsten, and rubber and the risk of Japan's being forced into dependence on communist nations for its industrial life—with all that implied. Always implicit in the doctrine was the assumption that the economic riches of the neighbors of the first domino, whether Greece or Indochina, were essential, and when the United States first intervened in those hapless and relatively poor nations, it kept the surrounding region foremost in its calculations. This willingness to accept the immense overhead charges of regional domination was constantly in the minds of the men who made the decisions to intervene.

The problem with the domino theory was, of course, its intrinsic conflict with the desire to impose priorities on U.S. commitments, resources, and actions. If a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, then that link has to be protected even though its very fragility might make the undertaking that much more difficult. But so long as the United States had no realistic

sense of the constraints on its power, it was ready to take greater risks. The complex interaction of the America's vast goals, its perception of the nature of its power, the domino vision of challenges, and the more modest notions implicit in the concept of priorities began in 1953 to merge in what became the start of the permanent debate and crisis in American strategic and diplomatic doctrine.

Washington had by 1947 become wholly convinced that the Soviet Union was in some crucial manner guiding many of the political and social upheavals in the world that were in fact the outcome of poverty, colonialism, and oligarchies, and that it was, thereby, seriously subverting the United States' attainment of its political and economic objectives of a reformed, American-led capitalist world order. Toward the end of the Korean War, the incipient conflicts built into such a definition of the world were paralleled and aggravated by a crisis in U.S. military technology and doctrine. These two threads inevitably intertwined late in 1953 in the "New Look" debate and in the beginnings of a perpetual search for a global strategy that could everywhere synthesize America's objectives and resources.

The Korean War tested the U.S. military's overwhelming superiority of firepower and technology, along with its capacity to sustain the economic and political costs of protracted war. Given the inconclusive end of the war along the thirty-eighth parallel after three years of combat, and given the total failure of Washington's September 1950 goal of reuniting the country by force of arms, the war had fully revealed the limits of American power. The domestic political controversy it created was less decisive, but it, too, disclosed the formidable political liabilities that such dismal struggles brought to the party in power. And in fiscal 1953, with military spending at 13.8 percent of the gross national product—three times the 1950 proportion—inflation and budget deficits exposed the constraints on American economic resources. In a word, the United States had undertaken a massive effort and achieved only inconclusive results; this reality raised the issue of the credibility of its power. No less important was the fact that it had become bogged down in Asia at the very moment its main priorities and attention were focused on Europe and the Middle East. To resolve these dilemmas became an obsession in Washington, one that affected every area of the world and influenced the U.S. strategy debate for the remainder of the century.

The effort to define a "New Look" for American foreign policy, culminating in Dulles's famous January 12, 1954, speech, was stillborn, for the Soviet test of a hydrogen bomb in August 1953 decisively broke the U.S. monopoly of strategic nuclear weapons. Land war, Dulles declared, could be fought with the forces of America's allies but the United States itself would rely on its "massive retaliatory power . . . by means and at places of our choosing." It was the only "modern way of getting maximum protection at bearable cost," for limited conventional war in Korea had involved potentially unlimited costs. The dark intimation that America might destroy Peking or Moscow because of events in some distant place was the beginning of a search for a new strategy, but the internal contradictions

of that view were immediately criticized in Washington. That quest did not preclude relatively minimal responses to what seemed to be small challenges, and even as the weight of military spending on the national economy was reduced substantially over the remainder of the decade and as strategic weapons became more prominent, the White House increased its reliance on covert warfare waged by the CIA—the success of which in Iran and Guatemala greatly encouraged this relatively low-cost, often inconspicuous form of intervention. For whatever the theory, in practice the United States continued to be deeply involved in very different political contexts in every corner of the globe. Throughout the 1950s Washington never husbanded finite resources rationally to attain its primary goals, because, while it could reduce the role of military spending in the economy, it was unwilling and unable to scale down its far more decisive political definitions of the scope and location of American interests in the world.

To a remarkable extent, America's leaders perceived the nature of the contradiction but never ceased to believe that they could find a solution. The intense defense debates of the middle and late 1950s, which made the reputations of numerous articulate and immensely self-confident military intellectuals like Henry Kissinger, Maxwell Taylor, and W. W. Rostow, inconclusively contradicted and neutralized each other. But what was constant in all such theories was the need to be active rather than passive in responding to new problems and challenges, for American power both to appear and to be credible, and to seek to control and direct, rather than be subject to the dictates of, highly fluid outside forces and events. To develop a sense of mastery was the objective, but the fact that the technologies and strategies for attaining it were constantly being debated produced a perpetual dilemma.

It was in this larger context of a search for a decisive global strategy and doctrine throughout the 1950s that the emerging Vietnam issue was linked to so many other international questions. Washington always saw the challenge of Indochina as just one part of a much greater problem it confronted throughout the world: the efficacy of limited war, the danger of dominoes, the credibility of American power, the role of France in Europe, and much else. Vietnam became the conjunction of the postwar crisis of U.S. imperialism at a crucial stage of America's much greater effort to resolve its own doubts about its capacity to protect the larger international socioeconomic environment in which its interests could survive and prosper. By 1960 every preceding event required that the credibility of U.S. power be tested soon, lest all of the failures and dilemmas since 1946 undermine the very foundations of the system it was seeking to construct throughout the world. It was mainly chance that designated Vietnam as the primary arena of trial, but it was virtually preordained that America would try somewhere to attain successes—not simply one but many—to reverse the deepening pattern of postwar history. . . .

The Vietnam War was for the United States the culmination of its frustrating postwar effort to merge its arms and politics to halt and reverse the emergence of states and social systems opposed to the international

order Washington sought to establish. It was not the first serious trial of either its military power or its political strategy, only the most disastrous. Despite America's many real successes in imposing its hegemony elsewhere, Vietnam exposed the ultimate constraints on its power in the modern era: its internal tensions, the contradictions between overinvolvement in one nation and its interests and ambitions elsewhere, and its material limits. Precisely because of the unmistakable nature of the defeat after so long and divisive an effort and because of the war's impact on the United States' political structure and aspirations, this conflict takes on a significance greater than that of either of the two world wars. Both of them had only encouraged Washington's ambition to guide and integrate the world's political and economic system—a goal which was surely the most important cause of its intervention in the Vietnam conflict after 1950.

While the strategic implications of the war for the future of American military power in local conflicts was the most obvious dimension of its defeat, it had confronted these issues often since 1946. What was truly distinctive was the collapse of a national consensus on the broad contours of America's role in the world. The trauma was intense; the war ended without glory and with profound remorse for tens of millions of Americans. Successive administrations fought the war so energetically because of these earlier frustrations, of which they were especially conscious in the early 1960s, scarcely suspecting that rather than resolving them, they would only leave the nation with a far larger set of military, political, and economic dilemmas to face for the remainder of this century. But by 1975 the United States was weaker than it had been at the inception of the war in the early 1960s, a lesson hardly any advocate of new interventions could afford to ignore.

The limits of arms and armies in Vietnam were clear by Tet 1968. Although the United States possessed nominally good weapons and tactics, it lacked a military strategy capable of overcoming its enemy's abilities and appropriate to its economic resources, its global priorities, and its political constraints in Vietnam, at home, and in the rest of the world. Although its aims in South Vietnam were never to alter, it was always incapable of coping with the countless political complexities that irrevocably emerge from protracted armed conflict. America's political, military, and ideological leaders remained either oblivious or contemptuous of these until the war was essentially lost. Even today they scarcely dare confront the war's meaning as Washington continues to assert aggressively its classic postwar objectives and interests in Latin America and elsewhere. America's failure was material, of course, but it was also analytic, the result of a myopia whose importance greatly transcended bureaucratic politics or the idiosyncrasies of Presidents and their satraps. The dominating conventional wisdom of American power after 1946 had no effective means of inhibiting a system whose ambitions and needs increasingly transcended its resources for achieving them. They remained unable and unwilling to acknowledge that these objectives were intrinsically unobtainable and irrelevant to the socioeconomic forms much of the Third World is adopting to resolve its

economic and human problems, and that the United States' effort to alter this pervasive reality was certain to produce conflict.

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