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From the Streets to the Books: The Origins of an Enduring Debate

From its beginning, the Vietnam War divided Americans. In the summer of 1965, President Lyndon Johnson made an open-ended military commitment to the defense of South Vietnam. It came after several months of a mounting crisis that left the beleaguered South Vietnamese government and its army on the verge of collapse in the face of a communist insurgency. Limited application of American military power had failed to halt the political-military deterioration. Earlier in 1965, Johnson had launched a bombing campaign against North Vietnam, which supported the Viet Cong insurgents and had sent American combat troops, beginning with some 3,500 marines. Despite the acceleration of the bombing and an increase of troops to 40,000 men, American officials recognized by July, 1965 that a much larger military commitment was the only means of saving South Vietnam from a communist takeover. Despite Johnson's effort to downplay the magnitude of his decision, Americans recognized that it meant that tens of thousands of additional troops soon would be sent to Vietnam and that indeed the nation was at war.

While most Americans supported Johnson's decision, going to war in Vietnam was met with less enthusiasm than other wars. About 60 percent of the public thought the military commitment was correct, but one-fourth of them thought it was a "mistake," while the remainder of people were uncertain. In another opinion poll in which Americans were asked which course of action should be followed – hold the line, negotiate and get out, carry the war to North Vietnam – not even a majority, only 48 percent, favored the first alternative that reflected the position of Johnson, while 31 percent supported "negotiations and get out" (barely 17 percent favored the

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more aggressive third alternative, and 4 percent were undecided). This hesitancy on the part of Americans contrasted sharply with their attitudes toward other recent wars: when Harry S. Truman sent US troops to fight in Korea in 1950, when George H. W. Bush launched war in the Persian Gulf in 1991, and when George W. Bush began the war to overthrow Saddam Hussein in 2003, at least three-fourths of the public in each case approved of their decisions.[1]

The public debate over US policy in Vietnam had indeed begun months earlier when Johnson authorized the earliest steps of American military involvement. On the night of March 24–25, 1965 – barely two weeks after the first small contingent of US combat troops landed in Vietnam – a "teach-in" at the University of Michigan marked the beginning of formal protest. As speakers criticized the movement toward war, Johnson's supporters carried banners proclaiming "all the way with LBJ." Within the next two months, teach-ins were held at campuses across the US. Teach-ins typically involved lectures, debates, and discussions; and although all points of view were welcomed, critics of US involvement dominated the discourse. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which was to become a leading voice of opposition to the war, organized the first national rally; it was held at the Washington Monument in the nation's capital on April 17 and drew some 25,000 young people. A month later – on May 15 – a throng of over 100,000, mostly college students, descended on Washington in response to a call for a national teach-in.

The organizers of the national teach-in offered equal time to officials of the Johnson administration. Although the administration declined that opportunity, it soon sent "truth squads" around the country to respond to its critics. The Department of State published *Aggression from the North*, which contended that the USA was obliged to defend its ally, South Vietnam, against communist North Vietnam's "aggression." Through the movement of troops and supplies, North Vietnam supported the Viet Cong, the communist insurgency that for several years had been engaging in a campaign of attacks and terrorism against the South Vietnamese government. *Aggression from the North* concluded that the major communist powers – the Soviet Union and the Chinese People's Republic – stood behind North Vietnam. Throughout the Cold War, US policy had been based on the principle of "containment" of communism; like Greece, Berlin, and Korea earlier, Vietnam was seen as the latest "test" of American resolve to stand by allies threatened by communism.

Critics of the administration's case for war, led by the longtime iconoclastic journalist I. F. Stone whose *I. F. Stone's Weekly* became a widely-read among antiwar advocates, argued that the State Department rationale was based on a misunderstanding of Vietnamese history and ignored the

legitimate grievances of the South Vietnamese people against their authoritarian and repressive government, which the US had been supporting for a decade. The US, Stone, and other critics argued, was intervening in a Vietnamese civil war.

Debating the War, 1965–1968: The Power–Morality Issue

From these beginnings in early 1965 and accelerating as involvement in Vietnam steadily escalated over the next three years, a debate between "doves" and "hawks" enveloped the American public. Notably, both sides claimed the moral high ground. Through demonstrations, marches, speeches, and other forms of nonviolent protest – including defiance of the selective service system that drafted young men into military service – opponents of the war carried their message that America was fighting an immoral war. To doves, the US needed to disengage, through withdrawal or negotiated settlement, from an untenable position. The protesters were challenged by pro-war groups who engaged in counter-demonstrations and marches to make their point that the war was necessary to defend freedom and to halt the spread of communism. To them, the war had the high moral purpose of upholding the freedom of the South Vietnamese.

The debate seemed chaotic. The antiwar side attracted a diverse range of individuals and organizations. While many men and women were drawn to political action for the first time, others had been involved in pacifist, anti-nuclear, feminist, and civil rights movements. Protest often lacked coordination and planning. The principal scholars of the antiwar movement write: "there were many antiwar movements in America. Protest had many masks, so different that some observers contended that there was no such thing as *an* antiwar movement." That confusing diversity however, also reflected strength: "the spasmodic, haphazard, frustrated, fatigued, and incoherent [protest] reflect[ed] the character of the peace and antiwar movement rather than a denial of its existence."[2] So it was a "movement of movements" that became the center of a national debate of unprecedented dimensions.

Paralleling the public confrontations in the streets, on campus, and other forms was an elite debate, waged in Congress, in prominent journals and in a number of books. Hearings of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, under the chairmanship of Senator J. William Fulbright (D-AK) who became disillusioned by Johnson's war policy, emerged as a forum for criticism of the war. As early as February 1966, Fulbright took the unprecedented step of conducting hearings on the necessity of a war that the country was then

waging. Among his many witnesses, none made a greater impact than George Kennan, who enjoyed enormous respect as a major architect of the policy of "containment" of the Soviet Union. Kennan undercut the administration's argument, stating bluntly that communist control of South Vietnam "would not…present dangers great enough to justify our direct military intervention."[3]

This sharp division over the war was unanticipated, because for the previous quarter century Americans had strongly supported the nation's foreign policy. Most wars in earlier US history – dating back to the Revolution against England and continuing into the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and World War I – had been controversial, with significant numbers of Americans challenging the necessity of the conflicts. The Union cause during the Civil War was always opposed by large numbers of Northerners, which was especially manifest in riots opposing conscription. World War II was the conspicuous exception; mobilized by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and by the morality of the Allied cause, Americans had no doubt of the necessity to defeat the Axis powers. The Cold War quickly followed and it seemed to Americans that the Soviet Union was following the kind of piecemeal aggression that the Germans, Japanese, and Italians had engaged in prior to World War II; the US, it seemed, had no choice but to halt aggression in its early stages, so the "containment" strategy was embraced as necessary for national security. When the Cold War got "hot" as the United Nations fought a "limited war" in Korea between 1950 and 1953, it triggered some disagreement among Americans; that controversy, however, was not so much over the necessity of resisting communist aggression, as it was over the means of waging the war.

Americans of the World War II–Cold War generation had become accustomed to linking the nation's power with a moral cause.[4] As that power became greater, it had accentuated the belief that the use of military force against totalitarianism that threatened democratic values – whether in the guise of fascism or communism – was justified and indeed necessary. To many Americans, the intervention in Vietnam lacked that power–morality link. What they saw and learned about Vietnam left them skeptical of the righteousness of their nation's cause. Over the two years prior to the Americanization of the war in the summer of 1965, Americans had seen South Vietnam torn apart by opposition from the Buddhist leadership. This opposition included the widely-publicized self-immolation of priests protesting against the American-supported government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Then came the overthrow of the Diem government in November 1963 and the brutal murders of Diem and his brother, which was followed by a confusing series of coups and counter-coups among military and civilian cliques. Meanwhile, the Viet Cong was stepping up its attacks. The situation

in South Vietnam left many wondering: Was this divided South Vietnamese state worthy of American support? How could the US "save" a people who lacked unity and resolve in fighting communism? When, in the summer of 1965, the US insisted on stability in the Saigon government, the two military leaders who took charge – Nguyen van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky – enlisted little enthusiasm in Washington or for that matter, in South Vietnam; as one American official said, the pair "seemed to all of us the bottom of the barrel, absolutely the bottom of the barrel."[5] The historian David Levy writes that,

> …throughout the Vietnam controversy, those Americans who opposed the war had no more effective allies than the string of corrupt, ineffective, arrogant, stubborn leaders of South Vietnam who paraded across the stage like so many figures from some comic opera."[6]

Questions about the legality of American policy in Vietnam further undermined the morality of the war. Critics claimed that the US violated the Geneva Accords of 1954 that provided for the end of French rule in Indochina and for the reunification of Vietnam after a two-year "temporary" division into northern and southern "zones." Instead through its cultivation of South Vietnam as an independent state, the US had perpetuated the division of Vietnam. In the early 1960s, it had sent military advisers to South Vietnam that far exceeded the number permitted in the Geneva agreements. And some critics asserted that President Johnson lacked constitutional authority to wage war, notwithstanding the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed by Congress in August 1964.

The most emotional and powerful questioning of the war's morality dealt with the lethal nature of US warfare. Coverage of the war included print and visual depictions of the widespread use of firepower on which American strategy depended. A range of weapons, made more deadly by technology, took warfare into virtually all areas of Vietnam. No aspect of the military campaign was more criticized than the bombing of North Vietnam and of communist positions in South Vietnam. In addition, American planes dropped chemical and biological defoliants that destroyed forests and crops throughout rural South Vietnam. The widespread use of napalm, with its capacity to inflict instant death or disfigurement on its victims, triggered still greater moral indignation. The fact that the US was inflicting such widespread destruction on a largely defenseless peasant society, inevitably killing and maiming thousands of civilians, removed – in the view of many Americans and foreign critics of the war – any claim to America's moral authority.

Central to the counter-argument of the war's defenders was that the morality–power link prevailed. Hence, from the President and other spokesmen for the war, both inside and outside official circles, came the persistent claim that the war had a clear moral imperative. Besides responding to the claims of an illegal war, hawks stressed how Vietnam was another Cold War "test." Adlai Stevenson, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, stated in 1964: "the point in Vietnam is the same as it was in Greece in 1947 and in Korea in 1950."[7] Failure to uphold the "commitment" to South Vietnam would embolden communist advances elsewhere in Asia. In a major speech on Vietnam in April 1965, President Johnson told Americans:

> Let no one think for a moment that retreat from Vietnam would bring an end to conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another. The central lesson of our time is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied. To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next.[8]

American objectives were altruistic; in that same speech, Johnson said: "We want nothing for ourselves, only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way."[9] And four years later, President Richard Nixon stated "everything is negotiable except the right of the people of South Vietnam to determine their own future."[10] So to defenders of the war, the moral purpose was embodied in the imperative to resist communist aggression, to stand by an ally, and to uphold international order.

As US involvement escalated, Vietnam became *the* issue in American politics. Beginning in 1966 and continuing until 1972, Americans in public opinion polls consistently identified "Vietnam" as the nation's major problem. No one in 1965 recognized the prolonged ordeal that lay ahead. In 1965 when the US undertook a direct combat role in Vietnam and the debate over Johnson's actions began, few Americans anticipated that the US was just beginning its longest war. Not until 1973 would an agreement end US involvement and bring home the last US combat troops. In the meantime, at its peak in 1967–1968 the American military presence would reach 535,000 and would be costing the US $30 billion a year (over $210 billion annually in 2014 dollars). As escalation failed to bring victory, the debate intensified and became increasingly acrimonious. Civility gave way to self-righteousness, moral indignation, and intolerance. Doves were often labeled communist-sympathizers, appeasers, naïve, and disloyal, while hawks found themselves being characterized as war mongers, baby-killers, arrogant, and immoral. Escalation and indecision in a war fought halfway around the globe had come to divide the country more deeply than any event since the American Civil War a century earlier.

Polls of public opinion during that period showed the extent to which the war divided Americans. The war produced various, and in some ways, contradictory reactions. On one level, there was a general, if uneven, trend toward more and more Americans considering the war a "mistake." This can be traced in their responses to the question – "In view of developments since we entered the fighting, do you think the US made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam?" – which was used in several polls of public opinion beginning in 1965. Between 1965 and late 1967, the percentage of Americans saying it was a "mistake" increased from roughly one-fourth (24 percent) to nearly one-half (46 percent), while the "not a mistake" responses decreased from 60 percent to 44 percent. This mounting dissatisfaction seemed to support the antiwar contention that the US should disengage, yet Americans mostly identified themselves as "hawks" not "doves." This ambiguity is underscored in opinion polls showing that while Americans supported the doves' calls for negotiations, they were hawkish in rejecting a settlement that might lead to communist domination of Vietnam. This led many Americans to favor further escalation of the war as the only means of ending the war satisfactorily. The polling data thus suggest that although Americans were increasingly dissatisfied with the direction the war had taken and believed it had been a mistaken undertaking, they were determined that it not end in defeat.[11]

As that response to the war indicated, the prospect of "failure" was always prominent – in some ways, central – to the debate over Vietnam. "Failure" was always anticipated: to critics, it was inherent in the decision to go to war; to supporters, it was foreseeable if Americans were irresolute and if the nation's power was used ineffectively.

To doves, the war was futile from the outset: America was engaged in a "fool's errand" in which the political objective of an independent non-communist South Vietnam could not be attained by military means, or at least by means that did not risk war with the major communist powers. Critics emphasized what they considered insurmountable political obstacles: the weakness and irresolution of the South Vietnamese government, the greater legitimacy and determination of North Vietnam and the communist insurgency in South Vietnam, the capacity of North Vietnam to draw on the resources of the Soviet Union and China, and the unwillingness of those powers to accept the defeat of their comrades in Vietnam. Hans Morgenthau, a renowned scholar of international relations, spoke of the futility of American involvement, asking how the US could gain prestige "by being involved in a civil war on the mainland of Asia and being unable to win it." Impending failure, Morgenthau went on, necessitated rethinking the enterprise: "Does not a great power gain prestige by mustering the wisdom and courage necessary to liquidate a losing enterprise?"[12]

On the other side, supporters of the war stressed the importance of South Vietnam's survival in terms of upholding America's position and prestige in the world. It was a war the US had to "win" – to force North Vietnam's acceptance of a divided country. While doves focused on political obstacles to American objectives, hawks stressed American military potential. US power, properly applied, would force North Vietnam from the battlefield. What bothered the hawks was what they considered to be growing evidence of American irresolution on two levels: misapplication of military power and divisions over the war within the country. Critical of the strategy the US adopted from 1965 to 1968, many supporters of the war saw it as a "strategy for defeat." Hawks constantly complained about limits placed on military operations, and their frustration was summed up early in the war when one Congressman told Johnson: "win or get out."[13] By the summer of 1967, high-ranking military officers had become increasingly critical of what they considered unwarranted civilian limitations on military operations. Hearings conducted by a subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee under the leadership of Democratic Senator John Stennis of Mississippi provided an opportunity for the Joint Chiefs of Staff to detail their criticism of Johnson's restrictions of the air war, claiming that unless the air force could bomb all potential targets, it would be impossible to win the war.[14] The hawks also believed that the prospects for remedying strategic deficiencies were undermined by the divisiveness at home, which not only was corrosive to national morale but aided the enemy. In his landmark speech of November 3, 1969, President Richard Nixon appealed for the support of "the great silent majority" in his effort to achieve "peace with honor." Dismissing antiwar critics as taking the "easy way" to end the war, he warned that failure in Vietnam could be prevented only if the "American people have the moral stamina and courage" to support South Vietnam. Should America fail – "the first defeat in our nation's history" – the result would be disastrous: the undermining of confidence in America's leadership and the very "survival of peace and freedom. . .throughout the world."[15] "Failure" would be too costly to contemplate.

The war's critics dominated the contemporary debate. The antiwar protesters first took the issue to the public and to a large extent defined the terms of the debate. It was this remarkable dissent – unprecedented in the Cold War – of mostly liberal political leaders, journalists, and academicians that attracted the greatest attention. For 20 years, the foreign policy elite had endorsed unequivocally the containment of communism, and now it was divided, as many establishment figures were challenging a war being waged in the name of containment.

The Battle of the Books: Doves and Hawks

The predominant view of the war as a mistake was reflected in a number of contemporary books. The titles of several such works convey the sense of a misguided mission; the range of backgrounds of the authors speaks to the breadth of the war's critics. *The Making of a Quagmire* was written by David Halberstam, who had received a Pulitzer Prize in 1963 for his reporting as a *New York Times* correspondent in Saigon; in his best-selling book, Halberstam concluded that there was no satisfactory outcome for the US. *Washington Plans An Aggressive War* was co-authored by Richard J. Barnet, who had worked for the State Department during the Kennedy administration before co-founding the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), a leftist think tank in 1963, Marcus Raskin, who had worked on the National Security Council staff before joining Barnet in establishing the IPS, and Ralph Stavins, an IPS fellow. *Intervention and Revolution*, a broad-ranging critique of US opposition to leftist movements, was also written by Barnet. *The Abuse of Power* was the work of Theodore Draper, a longtime independent historian-journalist and authority on communist movements in America and overseas. In a similar book, *The Arrogance of Power*, the influential senator J. William Fulbright, who was renowned as a leading authority on foreign policy and had emerged as a leading critic of the war, saw the US acting the same ways that other powers had throughout history by overextending commitments and resources and leading to their eventual decline. Both *The Bitter Heritage* by Arthur M. Schlesinger, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and former assistant to President John F. Kennedy, and *The Lost Crusade* by Chester Cooper, a former State Department official, traced a misguided policy – a misapplication of the containment doctrine – that led to tragic and mistaken war.[16] *Vietnam and the United States*, a book with a more prosaic title by the aforementioned scholar Hans Morgenthau, who, writing from a "realist" perspective, made much the same point: that the pursuit of global containment in a region of negligible strategic significance both wasted and overextended resources: "periphery military containment is counterproductive" resulting in a "senseless, hopeless, and brutalizing war."[17]

Supplementing these works, which dealt mostly with developments of the 1950s and 1960s, was a number of scholarly accounts that criticized US actions within the broader framework of Vietnamese history and culture. These included: *The United States in Vietnam* by two leading Southeast Asian experts, George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis, who saw American engaged in a misguided effort to undermine nationalism; *Vietnam: A Political History* by Joseph Buttinger, a German-born political activist and historian, who had supported the Diem government and had helped establish the American Friends of Vietnam, which lobbied for support of South Vietnam, but who

believed that American military intervention was doomed to fail.[18] Among the more scholarly writers, the best-known and widely-respected was Bernard Fall, a French-born, American-educated journalist-scholar who wrote extensively on Vietnam beginning in the 1950s. Living in Vietnam during much of that time, Fall's first-hand observations and interviews of figures on all sides of the political struggle made him the most influential, and most-cited contemporary authority. His several books – which included *Hell in a Very Small Place*, *Street without Joy*, and *The Two Viet-Nams* – reflected an open-minded attempt to understand the political change and conflict in a troubled Vietnam. Although Fall was strongly anticommunist and identified with the objective of preserving South Vietnam as an independent country, he viewed the US reliance on military means as devastating to Vietnamese society and leading to resentment and hatred of Americans. Fall was killed in Vietnam in February 1967, the victim of a sniper's bullet; his last articles were published posthumously as *Last Reflections on a War*. In that book, he wrote of American warfare as "technological counterinsurgency…depersonalized…dehumanized and brutal" that might yield a superficial military victory, but also would alienate Vietnamese and thus defeat the realization of the political objectives.[19]

As US involvement was approaching its end in 1972, the contemporary critique was given its fullest expression in two comprehensive and widely praised books: David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* and Frances FitzGerald's *Fire in the Lake*. Together these books extended, from different perspectives, the conventional criticism of the war. Halberstam focused on Washington: in particular, the men whose decisions pulled the US into the "quagmire" that had been the subject of his earlier book. His devastating portraits of the key members of President Kennedy's national security team – the "best and the brightest" – suggested an American policy driven by arrogance and the "historical sense of inevitable victory." FitzGerald focused on Vietnam – its political culture, society, and tradition. She argued that the US was engaged in a futile war that was attempting to resist the resiliency of Vietnamese nationalism. All of the military power of the US, while bringing enormous destruction and disrupting society, was irrelevant when viewed within the context of Vietnamese culture and history, which were moving inexorably toward the eventual triumph of the communist revolution.[20]

As the different approaches of the Halberstam and FitzGerald books underscore, the contemporary criticism of the war varied considerably in terms of focus and emphases. In some cases, Johnson and other policymakers were the subject of strident indictments, while in others they were treated more sympathetically, as misguided or misinformed, rather than as war mongers. In some cases, the Vietnamese, both America's ally and enemy, were given sparse or superficial treatment while in others an effort

was made to understand the conflict from their perspective and within the context of their nation's history and culture. Whatever the disparities in the prevalent works of the era, the message of a flawed and doomed war comes through: America had lost its moral purpose and failure was inevitable.

Opposing this predominant viewpoint were books and essays by supporters of US intervention, who argued that the war was necessary in terms of American security and that the objective of an independent South Vietnam was attainable. Important books defending the Johnson administration's policy included: *Why Vietnam?* by Frank Trager; *Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict* by Chester Bain; *South Vietnam: Nation under Stress* by Robert Scigliano. All three were associated with official US policy. Trager, a political scientist specializing in Southeast Asia, taught at New York University and worked on government economic assistance programs in Asia. Bain, a former professor of East Asian history, was an officer in the US Information Agency when he wrote his book. Scigliano, a political scientist at Michigan State University (MSU), served from 1957 to 1959 in that university's Vietnam Advisory Group, which was an important agent of the US government's effort to strengthen the administrative system and internal security forces of the South Vietnamese government. Closely associated with Scigliano was Wesley Fishel, who directed the MSU group and was a confidante of South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem, Fishel contributed an early pamphlet, *Vietnam, Is Victory Possible?*, which was widely cited by pro-war spokesmen.[21] So while the hawkish literature was not nearly as extensive as the dovish perspective, it did reiterate the themes of Vietnam's strategic importance and the ability of the US to achieve its objectives. From these modest beginnings during the war, the hawkish interpretation of the war gained considerable influence in the postwar debate.

The end of the war brought no lull in the controversy. The predominant wartime dovish critique and hawkish defense evolved into what can be labeled the orthodox and revisionist interpretations of the war, respectively. The gradual opening of thousands of presidential, diplomatic, and military documents of the Vietnam era over the past four decades has enabled scholars to write thoroughly researched works that examine American policy in greater depth and with sophistication. Also, limited access to the documents of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the former Soviet Union, and the Chinese People's Republic has provided important insight into the problems, actions, and thinking of America's enemy. The orthodox interpretation is represented in most of the scholarly writing, although it is also reinforced by the memoirs of some participants. The revisionist challenge to the orthodox school, however, has been advanced mostly by former military and civilian officials, but some journalists and scholars have made important contributions. Like the orthodox school, their writings reflect varying

degrees of scholarly documentation, but in general orthodox scholarship is more firmly grounded. That is not to argue that their conclusions are necessarily more correct. And it is certainly not to suggest that their views necessarily have greater impact in American political culture.

Revisionism: The "Noble Cause" and "If-Only" History

Seizing the postwar initiative were the war's defenders, including a number of prominent military officers; it is their work that constitutes the best-known theme of revisionism. It is they who have argued that the war was "winnable" and who blame American defeat on the irresolute leadership of President Johnson and other civilian officials, a flawed strategy that made inefficient use of US military power and the breakdown of support at home in large part because of what they regard as the media's antiwar message in their coverage of the war.

This rewriting of the Vietnam War, which argues for the plausibility of a retrospective "victory," is reminiscent of the way that other peoples have reconciled themselves to military defeat. It parallels in many ways the responses of the former Confederate states to their loss of the Civil War and of Imperial Germany to its defeat in World War I. In those earlier cases, veterans of the war, journalists, and political leaders wrote accounts that refused to accept that defeat resulted from the "outside" – the enemy's military superiority on the battlefield – but instead defeat came from "within"; by a "stab-in-the-back." In these histories, it was misguided civilian leaders who failed their country by denying support to the army at critical times, and by abandoning the military while victory was still within its grasp. Accompanying this shifting of the blame was the elevation of that lost war into a noble endeavor. For decades after the Civil War, Southern political culture treated the Confederate struggle to secede as an idealistic undertaking to preserve a way of life; it became the Lost Cause. The Lost Cause mythology explained defeat as a "stab-in-the-back." – General Robert E. Lee emerged in this version of history as a tragic figure – the invincible hero who was undermined by scheming and inept civilians. Similar stab-in-the-back thinking was prevalent in Germany after World War I, where many writers and political leaders contended that Germany had not been defeated, but that political leaders had prematurely accepted an armistice that imposed a punitive settlement. Such thinking, which gained wider acceptance as the worldwide Depression engulfed Germany, was a prominent factor in the rise to power of the Nazis in 1933.[22]

Reflecting the proposition that "all history is contemporary history," the revisionist interpretation of the Vietnam War gained momentum along with the ascendancy of conservatism during the 1970s and 1980s. It was appropriate that the pre-eminent voice of that movement would re-christen the Vietnam War. Speaking to the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention during the 1980 presidential campaign, Republican candidate Ronald Reagan proclaimed: "It is time we recognized that [in Vietnam] ours, in truth was a noble cause."[23] By elevating a divisive and futile war into a selfless, righteous effort by the US to save another people from communism, Reagan made it, in the words of one historian, "indistinguishable from World War II – the 'good war' of the nation's collective memory."[24] During his presidency, Reagan continued the "noble cause" theme (although not using the phrase again), asserting that the US had not really lost the war and that the media had undermined the military; he went on to promise that America would never again abandon an ally, as it had in South Vietnam, and that American troops would never again be denied the support and resources necessary to win. These statements reflected core contentions of the revisionist explanation of American failure.

So, as the defeated Confederacy created the Lost Cause mythology to explain the loss of the Civil War, political and military leaders, scholars, and others unwilling to accept defeat in Vietnam as being beyond the US have formulated the Noble Cause interpretation. Defeat was self-imposed. This both rationalizes the war and explains its results. Revisionists make a number of arguments and most of their representative works focus on one or two major points. The most comprehensive revisionist book is by the historian C. Dale Walton whose scholarly *The Myth of Inevitable US Defeat in Vietnam* refutes much orthodox writing and advances several key revisionist arguments.[25] Running throughout revisionism is the theme of "if-only" history – that different actions would have brought victory. The essential arguments of revisionists are:

1. "*The Necessary War"– involvement in Vietnam was vital in terms of US national security*. The policymakers were correct in their initial conviction that the Vietnam War was a critical Cold War test of American resolve. Having decided in 1954 to "hold-the-line" against further communist advance in Southeast Asia, the US risked a loss of credibility if it failed to uphold its commitment to assure an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam. "If-only" civilian leaders had the courage of their convictions, the United States would not have abandoned the war.
2. "*The First Lost Victory" – the US failed to use its power wisely in the early 1960s and thus undermined the South Vietnamese government and invited*

aggression by North Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem, South Vietnam's leader since 1954, was a strong anti-communist nationalist who established firm control over much of South Vietnam and eliminated communist influence, but the US failed to stand by him by when he acted forcefully against the communist-infiltrated Buddhists and student protests. The Kennedy administration failed to recognize Diem's understanding of his people and plotted the overthrow of the leader who was best qualified to stabilize South Vietnam. This led to chaos in South Vietnam, which the communists exploited. The US failure to respond with force to mounting communist attacks in 1964 and ear1y 1965 convinced the leadership of North Vietnam that the Americans would not fight. This sign of weakness only invited more aggression from North Vietnam. "If-only" the US had stood firmly with Diem and had employed greater force earlier, the larger war that followed could have been avoided.

3. "*Strategy for Defeat" – the strategy of 1965–1968 failed to follow the classic tenets of effective strategy*. Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara placed limitations on the military leadership, the bombing of North Vietnam, and General William Westmoreland fought a war of attrition on the ground in South Vietnam, all of which denied an opportunity to achieve victory and instead led to a stalemate. Thus, instead of employing its military power fully and directly against North Vietnam, the US engaged in a strategy of gradual escalation and became involved in a misguided ground war against the communist insurgency in South Vietnam. "If-only" the US had recognized that this was a war of aggression by North Vietnam and employed its power accordingly it could have achieved military victory.
4. "*Hearts-and-Minds" – American strategy minimized the importance of securing the South Vietnamese countryside and winning the loyalty of the peasantry*. A key to victory was in the villages where 80 percent of the South Vietnamese lived and where the American-supported government in South Vietnam had limited influence. Instead of engaging in warfare that destroyed villages and alienated peasants, the Americans and South Vietnamese should have established propaganda, education, land reform, and social welfare programs that would have won the peasants' "hearts-and-minds." So "if-only" civilian and military leaders had given greater priority to pacification, the Americans, working with the South Vietnamese army, could have built the government's control over the countryside.
5. "*Stab-in-the-Back" – The military effort was undermined on the home front, especially by the media's coverage of the war, which reflected an antiwar bias*. Journalists, particularly television reporters, carried their cynicism

about the American war effort into their reports. Portraying American warfare unfavorably while (at least implicitly) siding with the enemy and with the antiwar movement in the US, television coverage, as well as that in elite newspapers, played an important role in turning Americans against the war. "If-only" the media had acted responsibly and reported the war accurately, popular support could have been sustained.

6. *"The Second Lost Victory" – the US actually "won" the war a second time after 1968, but that achievement was squandered by an irresolute Congress and demoralized public*. Beginning with victory in the Tet Offensive of early 1968 (misinterpreted in the media as a defeat) and continuing with changes in strategy under President Richard Nixon, the military took the initiative and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. That achievement, however, was undermined at home. By the time that the Paris Agreements ended the US involvement in 1973, the US left behind a viable South Vietnam. But when that ally was subject to an all-out invasion by North Vietnam in 1975, the US – despite Nixon's promises – failed to come to its rescue. Congress refused to provide critical assistance, and the war was lost. Congress in turn reflected public opinion, which continued to be influenced by a critical media. "If-only" Americans, especially members of Congress, had recognized the military-political gains after 1968 and acted to maintain the South Vietnamese government's strengthened position, that government would have survived.

Each of these revisionist points has been advanced vigorously by a number of writers, most of who focus on one argument. Scholars and journalists have taken the lead in defending the "necessity" of the war. Indeed the most complete statement of this position is *Vietnam: The Necessary War* by Michael Lind. In *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965*, Mark Moyar argues that the US objectives in Vietnam were realistic and were attained only to be scuttled; his is the most complete statement of the "first lost victory" interpretation.

The best-known revisionists are the former high-ranking military officers in Vietnam who have been prominent in writing about military strategy and operations. Particularly prominent are *Strategy for Defeat*, by Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp and *On Strategy* by Colonel Harry Summers.

A few other former officers have presented the hearts-and-minds emphasis as the appropriate alternative for an American victory. Andrew Krepinevich, who served in the US Army in Vietnam, has written *The Army and Vietnam*, which remains the best statement of the hearts-and-minds pacification alternative. Implicit in the hearts-and-minds argument is criticism of Westmoreland for minimizing pacification; this point is driven

home by the prominent revisionist Lewis Sorley in his book, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam.*[26] With recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq raising questions about securing civilian populations, the "lessons" of the hearts-and-minds experience in Vietnam has given greater prominence to this aspect of Vietnam War scholarship.

The "second lost victory" argument has been advanced by both military officers as well as civilian officials of the Nixon Administration, including in the memoirs and histories written by Nixon himself and by Henry Kissinger, his national security adviser. Lewis Sorley's *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* provides the most comprehensive statement of the second "lost victory" claim. While a number of military and civilian leaders criticize the media in their works, it has been principally a few journalists who have reviewed the work of their colleagues and indicted them for distorted coverage of the war. The most devastating such work is the correspondent Robert Elegant's widely-cited essay "How to Lose a War." So the revisionist interpretation has been pressed on several fronts by participants, journalists, and scholars.[27]

The Orthodox School: A "Mistaken Commitment" and an "Unwinnable War"

The orthodox explanation of American failure in Vietnam follows the lines of the dovish view of the war while it was being waged. The orthodox school is, however, more than just an extension of the arguments of the critics of the war during the 1960s. The earlier emphasis on the war as being illegal and immoral has faded from prominence in the historical accounts. Much attention in orthodox writing is devoted to responding to the revisionist argument. Unlike the revisionist works, a number of books present comprehensive overviews of the substance of the orthodox interpretation, prominent among which are: George C. Herring's *America's Longest War*, Robert D. Schulzinger's *A Time for War*, William S. Turley's *The Second Indochina War*, Marilyn Blatt Young's *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990*, George Donelson Moss's *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, William J. Duiker's *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina*, David L. Anderson's *The Vietnam War*, John Prados's *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War,* Mark Atwood Lawrence's *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, and Mark Philip Bradley's *Vietnam at War.*[28] The orthodox interpretation rests on several related points:

1. "*Flawed Containment" – US national security was not on the line in Vietnam*. The containment doctrine was misapplied in Vietnam. Divisions within the communist world, and the determination of Vietnamese communist

leaders to avoid dependence on the major communist powers, especially their historic enemy China, suggested that a communist victory in Vietnam would have little geopolitical impact beyond that country. Moreover, whatever justification there may have been in trying to salvage half of Vietnam as an anti-communist bulwark in 1954 no longer applied after a decade of failure by the South Vietnamese government. There was no "lost victory," only a decade of ineffective leadership by Diem and his successors despite large sums of American military and economic assistance.

2. "*Unwinnable War"– the military effort was undermined by the forces of history that led to the significant disparity between America's ally and enemy*. No acceptable level of military power was sufficient to reverse the adverse political situation. The US was on the "wrong side" of history. The communist movement, embodied by Ho Chi Minh, represented the principal expression of Vietnamese nationalism, having led the seven-and-a-half year war that defeated the French. This legitimacy enabled the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to gain popular support and to endure American warfare. Their position was enhanced by the assurance of supplies and materials from the Soviet Union and China. By contrast, the American-supported government of South Vietnam lacked any claim to nationalist legitimacy, tracing its origins to the remnants of the French colonial regime and with a narrow base among the peoples of South Vietnam. Internal dissension, corruption, and its dependence on the US further weakened its stature. It could never escape the communist portrayal of it as an "American puppet." Two scholars summed up the point: "What was wrong in backing a weak, corrupt, inefficient regime against a brutally powerful, fanatically puritanical, ruthlessly efficient adversary, was that our side was likely to lose."[29]
3. "*Rational Disengagement" – the Tet Offensive was a military and political defeat for America and South Vietnam, revealing the hopelessness of the war*. President Johnson's ensuing decision to begin disengagement represented a rational reassessment of the limits of American military, political, and economic power. There was no "stab-in-the-back" behind disengagement, just an acceptance of the overextension of resources in behalf of a bankrupt policy. Television coverage of the war was not to blame; in fact, it was generally supportive of the US effort and reported the Tet offensive realistically. War weariness – not the machinations of an antiwar media or the influence of antiwar protesters – explains the downward trend in support for the war; Americans by 1968 reasonably concluded that the misadventure had to be ended.
4. "*Nixon's Flawed Strategy" – Nixon's promise of "peace with honor" was not and could not be achieved*. The 1973 Paris Agreement that ended US

involvement inevitably left behind a weak and divided South Vietnam and it was not a sound basis for a lasting peace, as virtually all American and Vietnamese officials and contemporary observers recognized. Moreover, for marginal gains in a negotiated settlement, Nixon continued the war for four years, invaded and destabilized Cambodia, and resumed the bombing of North Vietnam. Congress's decision not to save South Vietnam in 1975 was a rational act: what more could the US be expected to do? The communist victory in 1975, which was virtually inevitable, was only delayed by the Paris Agreements. In sum, Nixon did not achieve a "lost victory" only a "postponed defeat."

Approaching the Problem: Seven Key Issues

Each of the next seven chapters focuses on a critical issue that engages the orthodox and revisionist interpretations. Chapter 2 examines the fundamental point of the Vietnam War and US national security: was it a "necessary" or a "mistaken" war?

Chapter 3 moves to the complex controversy over the decisions of Kennedy and Johnson between 1961 and 1965 when South Vietnam appeared to be collapsing. In this instance, orthodox scholars disagree among themselves over whether Kennedy was determined to persevere in Vietnam or was planning to disengage and whether Johnson missed opportunities for peace. Revisionists insist that orthodox historians fail to comprehend the strength of South Vietnam – that in fact a "victory" had been achieved – and criticize Johnson for not exerting stronger military power earlier to preserve that "victory."

Chapter 4 explores the war that followed during the period of US escalation from 1965 to early 1968. The revisionist contention that a "strategy for defeat" violated basic concepts of warfare is countered by the orthodox response that the political weakness of the US position made the war "unwinnable" regardless of strategy.

Chapter 5 delves into another revisionist alternative: that more attention to pacification and winning hearts-and-minds would have led to victory. In response, orthodox writing argues that the weakness of the South Vietnamese government in rural areas limited the effectiveness of pacification.

Chapter 6 shifts attention to the home front, especially the revisionist argument that unfavorable reporting by a biased media undercut popular support, which is refuted, mostly by media scholars, that coverage of the war was overwhelmingly favorable to the American cause and was accurate in its depictions of political and military developments.

Chapter 7 deals with the Tet Offensive – the most important battles of the war – and whether the US and South Vietnam gained a decisive military victory that was undercut by media coverage and Johnson's decision to disengage or whether the Communists achieved such an important political-strategic victory that Johnson had no choice but to take the initiative to end the war through negotiations.

Finally, Chapter 8 analyzes the military and political strategy of Nixon and Kissinger and the revisionist contention that it shrewdly achieved victory only to be "lost" by an irresolute Congress – an argument dismissed by orthodox scholars on the grounds that the initiatives failed to alter the fundamental political balance in Vietnam and only postponed an inevitable defeat.

The conclusion assesses the competing "lessons" of the war as drawn from orthodox and revisionist histories and the extent to which they have influenced American national security policy over the last 40 years.

Summary

Running through both the contemporary and retrospective debate is the effort to explain America's most devastating failure. All sides agree there should be "no more Vietnams." The way to avoid another such failure divides Americans. Whether leaders and the general public think that more devastating use of military power or greater restraint in its employment is vital to strengthening US stature in the world depends, to a considerable extent, on how they account for the outcome of the war in Vietnam. Decades after its end, that tragic conflict remains a central part of American political culture.

Notes

1 Richard Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on US Foreign Policy since Vietnam: Constraining the Colossus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 31–36, 151–152.

2 Charles DeBenedetti with Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), pp. 388–389. This discussion on the contemporary debate also draws on: David W. Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam* (2nd. edn, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 46–75; Thomas Powers, *Vietnam: The War at Home* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 54–70.

3 "Kennan on Vietnam," *A New Republic Supplement,* Feb. 26, 1966. For an appraisal of the Senate hearings on Vietnam conducted by the Foreign Relations Committee under Fulbright and the Armed Services Committee under John C. Stennis (D-MS), see: Joseph A. Fry, *Debating Vietnam: Fulbright, Stennis, and Their Senate Hearings* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

4 The following analysis relies heavily on Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam*, pp. 47–55.
5 William Bundy, cited in *ibid.*, p. 53.
6 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
7 *Department of State Bulletin*, 50, June 8, 1964, p. 908.
8 *Public Papers of the President [PPP] Johnson 1965*, pp.394–399.
9 *Ibid.*
10 *PPP: Nixon 1969*, vol. 1: pp. 901–909.
11 John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1973), pp. 52–58, 81–91.
12 Morgenthau cited in Levy, *The Debate over Vietnam*, p. 73.
13 Mendel Rivers quoted in George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (4th edn rev., New York: McGraw Hill, 2001), p. 205.
14 Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of the War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. 296–301; Fry, *Debating Vietnam*, pp. 85–149.
15 *PPP: Nixon 1969*, Vol. 1, pp. 901–909.
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17 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Vietnam and the United States* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press 1965), pp. 20, 64–65, *et passim*.
18 George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: Dial, 1967); Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History* (New York: Praeger, 1968); this is a condensed edition of a three-volume history.
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23 *New York Times*, August 19, 1980.

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28 George C. Herring, *America's Longest War*; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War; The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Short Political and Military History, 1954–1975* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986); Marilyn Blatt Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991); George Donelson Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal* (2nd edn. rev., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1994); William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); David L.

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