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**Why Vietnam Was Unwinnable**

**By Kevin Boylan**

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An American paratrooper sergeant shouts orders to his squad as they charge brushline while subject to sniper fire in Vietnam on June 1, 1965.Credit...Horst Faas/Associated Press

While I was working for the Pentagon in the early 2000s, wounded veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan were routinely bused down from Walter Reed Hospital, in Northwest Washington, D.C., to receive their medals. It was a heart-rending experience to see these young men and women, many of them missing eyes, arms, legs or even multiple limbs, being wheeled through the building.

As a trained military historian who had specialized in the Vietnam War, I couldn’t help thinking about that earlier conflict as I watched them slowly making their way down the Pentagon’s corridors. And I wasn’t the only one. Many prominent figures in the government, military and media were drawing parallels with the Vietnam War, and a surprising number of them suggested that its lessons offered hope for victory in Iraq.

Those who made this argument contended that the United States had been on the verge of winning in Vietnam, but threw its chance for victory away because of negative press and a resulting failure of political will at home. This “lost victory” thesis originated with the Nixon administration and its supporters back in the 1970s, but gained considerable traction in the 1980s and ’90s after it was taken up by a group of influential revisionist historians, including Mark Moyar and Lewis S. Sorley III.

Taking their cue from the Vietnam revisionists, Iraq war optimists argued that just as Americans thought we were losing in Vietnam when in fact we were winning, so too were we winning in Iraq despite apparent evidence to the contrary. The problem, the optimists argued, was that — just as during the Vietnam War — naysaying pundits and politicians were not merely undermining popular support for the war, but giving our enemies hope that they could win by waiting for the American people to lose their will to continue the fight.

This kind of talk alarmed me because it discouraged a frank reassessment of our failing strategy in Iraq, which was producing that weekly procession of maimed veterans. And I also knew that the historical premises on which it was based were deeply flawed. America did not experience a “lost victory” in Vietnam; in fact, victory was likely out of reach from the beginning.

There is a broad consensus among professional historians that the Vietnam War was effectively unwinnable. Even the revisionists admit their minority status, though some claim that it’s because of a deep-seated liberal bias within the academic history profession. But doubts about the war’s winnability are hardly limited to the halls of academe. One can readily find them in the published works of official Army historians like Dr. Jeffrey J. Clarke, whose book “Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973” highlights the irrevocable problems that frustrated American policy and strategy in South Vietnam. Pessimism also pervades “Vietnam Declassified: The C.I.A. and Counterinsurgency,” a declassified volume of the agency’s secret official history penned by Thomas L. Ahern Jr., a career C.I.A. operations officer who served extensively in Indochina during the war.

In contrast, the revisionist case rests largely on the assertion that our defeat in Vietnam was essentially psychological, and that victory would therefore have been possible if only our political leadership had sustained popular support for the war. But although psychological factors and popular support were crucial, it was Vietnamese, rather than American, attitudes that were decisive. In the United States, popular support for fighting Communism in South Vietnam started strong and then declined as the war dragged on. In South Vietnam itself, however, popular support for the war was always halfhearted, and a large segment (and in some regions, a majority) of the population favored the Communists.

The corrupt, undemocratic and faction-riven South Vietnamese government — both under President Ngo Dinh Diem, who was assassinated in a 1963 coup, and under the military cliques that followed him — proved incapable of providing its people and armed forces a cause worth fighting for. Unfortunately for the United States and the future happiness of the South Vietnamese people, the Communists were more successful: By whipping up anti-foreign nationalist sentiment against the “American imperialists” and promising to reform the corrupt socio-economic system that kept most of the country’s citizens trapped in perpetual poverty, they persuaded millions to fight and die for them.

This asymmetry was the insurmountable stumbling block on the road to victory in Vietnam. Defeating the Communist guerrillas would have been an easy matter if the South Vietnamese people had refused to hide them in their midst. Instead, American and South Vietnamese could only grope after the elusive enemy and were rarely able to fight him except on his own terms.

And even as American soldiers began pouring into the country in 1965, there were already enough South Vietnamese troops on hand that they should have been able to defend it on their own. After all, the South Vietnamese forces outnumbered the Communists, were far better supplied, had vastly superior firepower and enjoyed a considerable advantage in mobility thanks to transport planes and helicopters. But their Achilles’ heel was their weak will to fight — and this shortcoming was never overcome.

Some years after the war ended, Lt. Gen. Arthur S. Collins, who had commanded all American troops in the central region of South Vietnam from February 1970 to January 1971, told an Army historian: “I didn’t think there was any way that South Vietnam could survive, no matter what we did for them. What put the final nail in the coffin, from my point of view, was when I learned from questioning [South Vietnamese] general officers that almost without exception their sons were in school in France, Switzerland, or the U.S. If they weren’t going to fight for South Vietnam, who was?”

Despite its ally’s fundamental weakness, the United States might possibly still have won, of course, had it been willing to fully mobilize its own national power. But that would have required raising taxes, calling up the Reserves and other sacrifices that President Lyndon Johnson shrank from asking the American people to make.

In [a recent New York Times article](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/19/opinion/was-vietnam-winnable.html?mcubz=1), Mr. Moyar, the revisionist historian, decried “the absence of presidential cheerleading” and took Johnson to task for failing to create a “war psychology” that would have made Vietnam into a patriotic crusade (and presumably silenced the war’s critics). Mr. Moyar argued, “The public’s turn against the war was not inevitable; it was, rather, the result of a failure by policy makers to explain and persuade Americans to support it.”

But Johnson was the most astute politician to sit in the White House during the 20th century, and he knew that he faced a paradox. As long as the war in Vietnam didn’t demand too much of them and they believed that victory was just around the corner, most Americans would support it. But if Johnson admitted publicly that South Vietnam could not survive without a full commitment by the United States, he knew that support would crumble.

Such a move would reveal the war’s unpleasant truths: that South Vietnam’s government was an autocratic kleptocracy, that its military was reluctant to fight, that much of its population willingly supported the Communists, that North Vietnam was matching our escalation step by step, that Johnson had committed the country to war without having a plan to win it and that the Pentagon had no real idea when it would be won. And Johnson knew full well that if the public turned against the war, it would reject his leadership and cherished Great Society domestic agenda as well.

So like other presidents before and after him, Johnson tried to conceal the bleak realities of Vietnam from the American people and deliberately misled them about the war’s likely duration and cost. Just about the last thing he wanted was to engender a wartime psychology — much less call for full mobilization. The Communists didn’t need American journalists and antiwar protesters to reveal that public enthusiasm for the war was fragile. Johnson’s refusal to raise taxes or call up the Reserves had made that obvious from the outset — just as our failure to impose new taxes or enact a military draft since 9/11 signals our enemies that America’s will to fight is weak.

Although the United States undoubtedly had the means to prevail in Vietnam, the war was unwinnable at the level of commitment and sacrifice that our nation was willing to sustain. As the renowned historian George Herring put it, the war could not “have been ‘won’ in any meaningful sense at a moral or material cost most Americans deemed acceptable.”

Perhaps the key lesson of Vietnam is that if the reasons for going to war are not compelling enough for our leaders to demand that all Americans make sacrifices in pursuit of victory, then perhaps we should not go to war at all. Sacrifice should not be demanded solely of those who risk life and limb for their country in combat theaters overseas.

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