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The War We Could Have Won
by Stephen J. Morris

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The Vietnam War is universally regarded as a disaster for what it did to the American and Vietnamese people. However, 30 years after the war's end, the reasons for its outcome remain a matter of dispute.

The most popular explanation among historians and journalists is that the defeat was a result of American policy makers' cold-war-driven misunderstanding of North Vietnam's leaders as dangerous Communists. In truth, they argue, we were fighting a nationalist movement with great popular support. In this view, "our side," South Vietnam, was a creation of foreigners and led by a corrupt urban elite with no popular roots. Hence it could never prevail, not even with a half-million American troops, making the war "unwinnable."

This simple explanation is repudiated by powerful historical evidence, both old and new. Its proponents mistakenly base their conclusions on the situation in Vietnam during the 1950's and early 1960's and ignore the changing course of the war (notably, the increasing success of President Richard Nixon's Vietnamization strategy) and the evolution of South Vietnamese society (in particular the introduction of agrarian reforms).

For all the claims of popular support for the Vietcong insurgency, far more South Vietnamese peasants fought on the side of Saigon than on the side of Hanoi. The Vietcong were basically defeated by the beginning of 1972, which is why the North Vietnamese launched a huge conventional offensive at the end of March that year. During the Easter Offensive of 1972 - at the time the biggest campaign of the war - the South Vietnamese Army was able to hold onto every one of the 44 provincial capitals except Quang Tri, which it regained a few months later. The South Vietnamese relied on American air support during that offensive.

If the United States had provided that level of support in 1975, when South Vietnam collapsed in the face of another North Vietnamese offensive, the outcome might have been at least the same as in 1972. But intense lobbying of Congress by the antiwar movement, especially in the context of the Watergate scandal, helped to drive cutbacks of American aid in 1974. Combined with the impact of the world oil crisis and inflation of 1973-74, the results were devastating for the south. As the triumphant North Vietnamese commander, Gen. Van Tien Dung, wrote later, President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam was forced to fight "a poor man's war."

Even Hanoi's main patron, the Soviet Union, was convinced that a North Vietnamese military victory was highly unlikely. Evidence from Soviet Communist Party archives suggests that, until 1974, Soviet military intelligence analysts and diplomats never believed that the North Vietnamese would be victorious on the battlefield. Only political and diplomatic efforts could succeed. Moscow thought that the South Vietnamese government was strong enough to defend itself with a continuation of American logistical support. The former Soviet charge, d'affaires in Hanoi during the 1970's told me in Moscow in late 1993 that if one looked at the balance of forces, one could not predict that the South would be defeated. Until 1975, Moscow was not only impressed by American military power and political will, it also clearly had no desire to go to war with the United States over Vietnam. But after 1975, Soviet fear of the United States dissipated.

During the war the Soviets despised their North Vietnamese "friends" (the term of confidential bureaucratic reference, rather than "comrades"). Indeed, Henry A. Kissinger's accounts of his dealings, as Nixon's national security adviser, with President Thieu are models of respect when compared with the bitter Soviet accounts of their difficulties with their counterparts.

In secret internal reports, Hanoi-based Soviet diplomats regularly complained about the deceitfulness of the North Vietnamese, who concealed strategic planning from their more powerful patron. In a 1972 report to Moscow, the Soviet ambassador even complained that although Marshal Pavel Batitsky, commander of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, had visited Hanoi earlier that year and completed a major military aid agreement, North Vietnamese leaders did not inform him of the imminent launch date of their Easter Offensive.

What is also clear from Soviet archival sources is that those who believed that North Vietnam had more than national unification on its mind were right: Its leaders were imbued with a sense of their ideological mission - not only to unify Vietnam under Communist Party rule, but also to support the victory of Communists in other nations. They saw themselves as the outpost of world revolution in Southeast Asia and desired to help Communists in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and elsewhere.

Soviet archives show that after the war ended in 1975, with American power in retreat, Hanoi used part of its captured American arsenal to support Communist revolutions around the world. In 1980 some of these weapons were shipped via Cuba to El Salvador. This dimension of Vietnamese behavior derived from a deep commitment to the messianic internationalism of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Vietnam today is not the North Vietnam of 1955, 1965 or 1975. Like post-Mao China it has retreated from totalitarianism to authoritarianism. It has reformed its economy and its foreign policy to become more integrated into the world. But those changes were not inevitable and would not necessarily have occurred had Mikhail Gorbachev not ascended to power in Moscow, and had the Soviet Union

and its empire not collapsed. Nor would these changes necessarily have occurred had China not provided a new cultural model for Vietnam to follow, as it has for centuries.

Precisely because Vietnam has changed for the better, we need to recognize what a profoundly ideological and aggressive totalitarian regime we faced three, four and five decades ago. And out of respect for the evidence of history, we need to recognize what happened in the 1970's and why.

In 1974-75, the United States snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. Hundreds of thousands of our Vietnamese allies were incarcerated, and more than a million driven into exile. The awesome image of the United States was diminished, and its enemies were thereby emboldened, drawing the United States into new conflicts by proxy in Afghanistan, Africa and Latin America. And the bitterness of so many American war veterans, who saw their sacrifices so casually demeaned and unnecessarily squandered, haunts American society and political life to this day.

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