

The Vietnam War in History

The two major narratives regarding the American effort to defeat communist forces in South Vietnam are by necessity artificial constructs. Each narrative is a large tent that houses many points of view. Each, therefore, inevitably includes works by authors who have a wide variety of disagreements, even as they agree on the larger issues of whether the United States should have intervened in Vietnam and whether it could have won the war that followed. For example, one major issue that sharply divides orthodox historians is whether John F. Kennedy was planning to withdraw from Vietnam had he won the 1964 election. Among the prominent historians who argue that Kennedy planned to disengage from Vietnam are David Kaiser (*American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War*, 2000) and Fredrik Longevall (*Choosing War: The Last Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*, 1999). Those who disagree include Robert Schulzinger (*A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975*, 1997) and George McT. Kahin (*Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam*, 1986). Revisionist historians have their own disagreements, including on the vital issue of how the ground war in South Vietnam should have been fought. For example, two major works by serving US Army officers are often juxtaposed because they advocate diametrically opposing approaches and were published relatively soon after the war: *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (1982), by Colonel Harry Summers Jr., and *The Army and Vietnam* (1986), by Lt. Colonel Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr. Summers argues that the United States failed in Vietnam because it did not sufficiently stress conventional warfare and that the US military effort should have been concentrated against North

Vietnam, which controlled the Communist insurgency in the South. In sharp contrast, Krepinevich argues that the US military overemphasized conventional warfare when it faced a guerrilla war in South Vietnam that required a multi-faceted counterinsurgency strategy to produce victory. These and other internal differences notwithstanding, the orthodox and revisionist narratives together provide the best available framework for understanding the historiography and key issues of the Vietnam War.

ORTHODOXY

Orthodox historians argue that it was a major mistake for the United States to get involved in Vietnam and once this country found itself at war, that war was unwinnable. Thus John Prados titled his history of the war *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (2009). Or, as Robert Schulzinger put it somewhat earlier in *A Time for War*, “The United States embarked on the impossible task of creating a separate state and society in the southern part of a single land.”¹ This perspective almost invariably is grounded on two fundamental assumptions: first, Communist forces led by Ho Chi Minh represented the only authentic and viable form of Vietnamese nationalism; second, the war in the South, notwithstanding the fact that North Vietnam ultimately controlled and directed the Communist insurgency there, began as a spontaneous response to local inequities – most notably in land ownership – and to repression by the regime headed by Ngo Dinh Diem that was attempting to maintain those inequities. The first assumption has remained relatively consistent over time, although in recent years some orthodox scholars have granted Ngo Dinh Diem a limited measure of nationalist legitimacy. The second assumption, however, has evolved in one significant way. Initially, the orthodox narrative maintained that the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam was an indigenous rebellion. For example, in 1962 the French scholar and expert on Vietnam Phillippe Devillers claimed that “the insurrection existed before the Communists decided to take part” and that “the people were literally driven by Diem to take up arms in self defense.” In the United States, historians George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis wrote in 1967 that “insurrectionary activity” started in South Vietnam “under Southern leadership not as

¹ Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 96; see also John Prados, *Vietnam, The History of an Unwinnable War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

a consequence of any dictate from Hanoi, but contrary to Hanoi's injunctions." Once the war was over and more information became available, it quickly became clear to many orthodox observers that this narrative was inaccurate. Thus in 1976 Jean Lacouture, a French expert on Vietnam who had believed that the Communists in South Vietnam enjoyed considerable autonomy, acknowledged that they were "piloted, directed, and inspired by the political bureau of the Lao Dong [Communist] Party, whose chief was and remains in Hanoi." Currently, the prevailing orthodox narrative, while stressing grievances in the South and the crucial role of local Communists, accepts that the insurrection in the South was controlled from Hanoi virtually from the beginning. William J. Duiker therefore speaks for many orthodox commentators when he claims that "the insurgency was a genuine revolt based in the South, but it was organized and directed from the North."²

The orthodox outlook prevails in most of the major textbooks on the war. One of the most widely assigned textbooks in college and university courses on the war is *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, by George Herring. Herring is one of the most respected historians of the Vietnam War – see his *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (1991) – and his textbook has earned a reputation for comprehensiveness and balance. *America's Longest War* therefore carries a lot of weight when it informs its readers that the American effort to maintain an independent non-Communist South Vietnam "probably was doomed from the start." This was the case because the United States was attempting to preserve a flawed social order in South Vietnam, "and there was no long-range hope of stability without revolutionary change." Turning to the issue of containment, the fundamental American policy for dealing with the Soviet Union and the rest of the Communist world during the Cold War, Herring argues that regardless of how one evaluates containment as a whole, "that containment was misapplied in Vietnam . . . seems beyond debate." On the matter of the origins of the rebellion in the South, Herring quotes Duiker while adding that there was more "complexity" to the issue because the Communist Lao Dong Party in Hanoi was a unified national party

² Philippe Devillers, "The Struggle for Unification in Vietnam," in *North Vietnam Today: Profile of a Communist Satellite*, ed. P. J. Honey (New York and Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 42. The Kahin/Lewis quotation and the Lacouture quotation are in Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 15, 18; William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), 198.

whose members came from all parts of the country.³ Another widely used and well-crafted textbook, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, by George Donelson Moss, notes under the heading “Why We Lost and They Won” that the “creation of an independent South Vietnam was doomed to fail from the outset. The Republic of South Vietnam could never have become a viable nation-state.” Moss adds that because of the weaknesses of the South Vietnamese government and the inability of American planners to come up with a successful strategy, “only a Communist triumph could bring peace to southern Vietnam.” With regard to containment, “the outcome of the American Indochina war invalidated its prime ideological justifications and suggested that the containment ideology itself had been misapplied.” Moss quotes and generally follows Duiker on the matter of the origins of the rebellion in South Vietnam.⁴

According to the orthodox narrative, Vietnam, and indeed all of Indochina, lacked strategic importance in the Cold War and therefore did not merit direct American engagement. This narrative also rejects the validity of the domino theory, made famous by a metaphor President Dwight Eisenhower used in explaining his administration’s commitment to defend South Vietnam in 1954, according to which the fall to Communism of one country victimized by subversion or attack could lead to the rapid collapse of its neighbors. Further, in committing the United States to maintain a non-Communist South Vietnam, American policy makers did not appreciate the strength and determination of the North Vietnamese regime or the Communist Vietcong guerrillas fighting in the South, or that their Marxist program had a strong nationalist component and therefore considerable popularity. North Vietnamese president Ho Chi Minh, the orthodox narrative maintains, was a nationalist, and in fact a nationalist first, as well as a Communist. Ho had led the struggle that drove the French from Vietnam in a war that lasted from 1946 to 1954; as a result, he had nationalist credentials and personal popularity unmatched by any non-Communist Vietnamese leader. Nor did the United States sufficiently examine the weaknesses of its South Vietnamese clients, beginning with the government headed by Ngo Dinh Diem from 1954 to 1963 and continuing with its successors through 1975, and therefore it did not grasp their vulnerability to an insurgency that at its core was provoked by inequities in South Vietnam. Indeed,

³ Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 5, 339, 357, 80.

⁴ George Donelson Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal, Fifth Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2006), 29, 421, 425, 102.

a common orthodox claim is that the South Vietnamese regime from the start was essentially an American creation and therefore lacked any legitimacy. An important corollary of the orthodox position that the Vietnam War was unwise and unwinnable is that the entire tragedy could have been avoided had American policy makers correctly assessed their country's vital interests and understood the limits of its power, especially in a place such as Vietnam, where the odds were stacked so strongly against a non-Communist alternative.

With regard to the years 1965 to 1973, when US combat forces were directly involved in the fighting, orthodox historians generally agree that America's military strategy was unsuited to the conditions in Vietnam. Between 1965 and 1968 the US ground campaign in South Vietnam produced a highly destructive war of attrition incapable of securing anything more than a bloody stalemate. Extensive bombing added to the destruction but could not break the stalemate. Meanwhile, the bombing campaign directed against North Vietnam failed to achieve its goal of forcing Hanoi to end its effort to take over the South. All this in the end eroded the American public's support for the war. These historians further argue that the Tet Offensive of 1968, in which Communist Vietcong guerrillas and North Vietnamese troops carried out attacks against more than 100 cities and towns, demonstrated the futility of American policy in Vietnam. Even though Communist forces in the end were repulsed with staggering losses – the Vietcong, who did most of the fighting, were largely destroyed – those losses over time were replaceable. The war itself overall had become a quagmire with no end in sight, and the American people were correct to intensify their demand that it be brought to an end. Nor did the improved military situation between 1968 and 1972 and the 1973 Paris Peace Accords under which the United States withdrew its remaining military forces from Vietnam solve South Vietnam's fundamental social and political weaknesses, and it was those weaknesses, not America's failure to back the South Vietnamese regime with sufficient aid over the next several years, that led to that regime's defeat and collapse in 1975.

Among the many ironies of the Vietnam War and the debate that surrounds it is that one of the most forceful expositions of the orthodox case against America's effort in Vietnam was made by none other than Robert S. McNamara, who as secretary of defense to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson from January 1961 through February 1968 was the chief strategist of that involvement, to the point where critics often referred to it as "McNamara's War." That

exposition was a long time coming, as McNamara did not make it until the publication of his memoir, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995), more than a quarter century after he left his post at the Pentagon and two decades after the war had ended with a Communist victory. McNamara's belated retrospective provoked widespread anger and/or contempt from, among others, both orthodox and revisionist historians of the war. For different reasons, to be sure, historians in both camps blamed McNamara for mismanaging American foreign policy in the 1960s. Again for different reasons, both sides rejected what they regarded as his effort, even as he admitted to having made errors, to somehow exculpate himself for that mismanagement. At the same time, notwithstanding what many hostile orthodox historians thought of McNamara's decision to speak up after so many years, *In Retrospect* seemed to validate the orthodox side in the Vietnam debate.

Even before getting to the body of his argument, a clearly apologetic McNamara, in a single six-word sentence, in effect repudiated just about everything he and the other architects of US policy in Vietnam had done for seven years: "Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong," he confessed.⁵ And why did the McNamara and his colleagues go so wrong? According to McNamara, now armed with the invaluable perspective of hindsight, he and his fellow American policy makers had attempted to deal with the complex crisis they faced in Southeast Asia with "sparse knowledge, scant experience, and simplistic assumptions."⁶ Those assumptions included accepting the notion of the monolithic nature of international Communism and the validity of the domino theory. American policy makers in addition had failed to ask a number of the "most basic" questions, including whether the fall of South Vietnam would lead to the fall of the rest of Southeast Asia, whether that development was a threat to Western security, and what kind of war (conventional or guerrilla) would develop if the United States sent combat troops to Vietnam.⁷

McNamara also retrospectively instructed his readers on the lessons he had learned from America's Vietnam experience. During the Vietnam War era, America's leaders failed to understand the "geopolitical intentions" of their adversaries – North Vietnam, the Vietcong, the Soviet Union, and China – a failure that included totally underestimating the

⁵ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), xvi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29. ⁷ *Ibid.*, 39, 101.

“nationalistic aspect of Ho Chi Minh.” Nor did they understand the South Vietnamese leaders whose cause this country was supporting, beginning with Ngo Dinh Diem, a man McNamara calls an “enigma to me and . . . virtually every American who met him.” American leaders did not appreciate the power of nationalism and compounded that lack of insight by being woefully ignorant of Vietnamese history, culture, and politics. They did not recognize the limits of modern, high-technology military weaponry or appreciate the challenges of dealing with unconventional warfare. Finally, they did not appreciate that there are some problems in international affairs “for which there are no immediate solutions.”⁸ There was nothing new in McNamara’s “lessons”: they already were and have remained central to the orthodox analysis. However, few of the volumes by the vast legion of McNamara’s orthodox critics have provided a more comprehensive critique of what he did as secretary of defense than he does himself in the pages of *In Retrospect*.

Marxism and Neo-Marxism

One segment of the Vietnam debate does not fit easily into the orthodox/revisionist categorization: the Marxist perspective, along with its offshoots that are sometimes labeled neo-Marxist and/or the New Left school. Works based on Marxist or neo-Marxist/New Left assumptions are sometimes grouped with the mainstream orthodox narrative works because they share the assumption that the Vietnam War was unwinnable for the United States. Marxists also condemn America’s intervention in Vietnam on moral grounds, another point of commonality with some, though certainly not all, orthodox historians. However, Marxist historiography differs in a crucial way from the orthodox liberal realist narrative because it is rooted in the notion of inevitability: in this case the assumption that the United States as the world’s leading capitalist power was driven by imperialist economic imperatives to intervene in Indochina to stop the advance of Communism and/or radical nationalist movements. This determinism in effect renders moot any discussion of what the United States might or should have done by denying the possibility of alternative options its policy makers might realistically have chosen. The Marxist analysis also renders any serious debate moot by tending to condemn *a priori* virtually any action the United States took during the Cold War (and before and after it as well) while whitewashing or ignoring completely

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41–43, 321–23.

the violence and repression committed by Communist regimes since a group of Marxists led by Vladimir Lenin established the world's first such regime in Russia in November 1917. In the case of the Vietnam War, those getting a pass, presumably for representing the "people" and promoting historical progress toward the realization of socialism, are the North Vietnamese government and the guerrilla forces in South Vietnam that operated under its control as well as North Vietnam's two main backers, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The traditional Marxist perspective with regard to the Vietnam War is probably best represented by Gabriel Kolko's *Anatomy of a War: The United States and the Modern Historical Experience* (1985). One volume often used as a textbook that reflects the neo-Marxist/New Left perspective is Marilyn B. Young's *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (1991).⁹

REVISIONISM

The revisionist narrative on the Vietnam War matches the orthodox approach in terms of variety and complexity. More to the point, however, is that the revisionist case is more difficult to make. The reason is that orthodox commentators – often leaving unexamined some of their key assumptions such as the stakes in Vietnam were minor and the war in any event could not have been won – basically can limit their focus to the question of why the United States failed in Vietnam. Revisionists must confront that question, but then they must venture afield from the relatively firm ground of historical fact – America's failure in Vietnam – to the quagmire of what historians call counterfactual history to explain how, in their judgment, the United States could have succeeded in

⁹ See Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991). Seth Jacobs, author of a volume on Ngo Dinh Diem that supports the orthodox position, notes that Young "can fairly be said to represent the far-left position on Vietnam" (http://bcm.bc.edu/issues/fall_2012/linden_lane/assigned-reading.html). David G. Marr, who likewise cannot be considered a revisionist, notes in his review of Young's book that "Young romanticizes the followers of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam . . . and the National Liberation Front, portraying them as if they always treated each other with care and respect, endured endless privations cheerfully, never doubted their cause, never acted brutally." See David G. Marr, review of *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990*, by Marilyn B. Young, *Pacific Historical Review* 62, no. 3 (August 1993): 393–95. Not everyone places the Marxist narrative in or near the orthodox camp. Gary Hess calls it "a more radical version of revisionism." See Gary Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 47, n.24.

Vietnam. This formulation of counterfactual arguments regarding the Vietnam War becomes even more problematic because revisionists, however strongly they dissent from the orthodox narrative, disagree among themselves about how the war could have been won. They disagree, often very strongly, on which aspects of the American war effort were faulty and on what alternative strategy and tactics were needed to correct those faults. And, inevitably, by offering counterfactuals, revisionist commentators are burdened by arguments that can never be proven. That said, there is a great deal one can point to in terms of faulty judgment and errors made by both civilian and military policy makers who were in charge of America's effort on behalf of South Vietnam to lend credence to the case that viable alternatives existed to what the United States did in Vietnam, and that therefore the mission to defend South Vietnam from Communism could have succeeded there.

Vietnam, the "Lesson of Munich," the Cold War, and Containment

The anchor of the revisionist narrative is its defense of the application of America's Cold War policy containment to Vietnam, a policy dating from the presidency of Harry Truman. The key postulate here is that this commitment cannot be viewed in isolation but only in the international context of the time: that is, containment was a necessary response to a genuine global Communist threat; and, at a time of great peril and uncertainty, Communist initiatives – both Soviet and Chinese – turned Vietnam into one of several Cold War fronts where containment was required. As Guenther Lewy notes in *America in Vietnam* (1978), his groundbreaking defense of America's effort to defend the independence of South Vietnam, from the early days of the Cold War immediately after World War II into the 1960s, "the fear of communism was not an irrational obsession." The post-World War II expansion of Soviet power into central Europe cast what Lewy accurately calls "a menacing shadow over Western Europe" that by 1947 had given the United States good reason to implement containment in the first place. The Communist victory in China in 1949; the Sino-Soviet alliance of February 1950; and, in June of that same year, the invasion by North Korea of South Korea and the resultant Korean War (1950–1953) had by necessity brought containment to Asia. Within a short time, with the support of several Southeast Asian countries and American allies farther afield, containment was extended to Vietnam. This was a reasonable response. The world of the 1950s and

early 1960s was highly unstable, a place in which, Lewy asserts, “a Communist victory anywhere appeared to threaten the U.S. because it represented a further extension of Soviet power.”¹⁰ In terms of South Vietnam itself, while pointing to the shortcomings of the Diem regime and significant opposition to it, Lewy rejects the orthodox contention that the Communist insurrection arose spontaneously from conditions in the South. As he puts it, and as revisionists generally have agreed, “the decision to begin the armed struggle in the South was made by the Central Committee of the . . . communist party of Vietnam, in Hanoi in 1959.”¹¹

In defending the extension of containment to Vietnam, Lewy does not argue for that country’s vital strategic importance to the United States. Indeed, he concedes that the United States exaggerated the geopolitical importance not only of Vietnam but also of Southeast Asia. He is not alone among revisionists in making this point. R. B. Smith, author of the three-volume study *An International History of the Vietnam War*, agrees about Vietnam’s place in the world, adding that ultimately not only the Americans but also the Soviets and Chinese attributed to Vietnam “an international significance out of all proportion to its size.”¹² C. Dale Walton, author of *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam* (2002), observes that “there was little about South Vietnam, or even all of Indochina, to indicate that the area was particularly vital to US interests.”¹³ But, as these and other revisionists point out, the Cold War context raised the stakes involved in what happened to Vietnam well beyond that country itself.

The argument for containment in Vietnam has been made comprehensively by Michael Lind in *Vietnam, The Necessary War: An Interpretation of America’s Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (1999). According to Lind, on one level the Cold War “was the third world war of the twentieth century.” In particular, it was “a contest for global and military primacy” between the United States and the Soviet Union, the two military super-powers of the second half of that century. More fundamentally, Lind joins with other revisionist scholars in stressing that at its core the Cold War was much more than a geopolitical conflict between the leading military

¹⁰ Lewy, *America in Vietnam* 420–21. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² R. B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, vol. 2, *Kennedy Strategy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 1.

¹³ C. Dale Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002), 18. Walton cites a May 1954 memo from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson to this effect.

powers of the age: it was an *ideological* conflict between totalitarian Communist societies led by the Soviet Union and democratic capitalist societies led by the United States, with the Soviet Union committed to a program of global expansionism that would eliminate free societies and make Marxist socialism the world's dominant economic and social system. As Lind puts it, "The Soviet Union was not only a superpower but the headquarters of the global religion of Marxism-Leninism, with zealous adherents in dozens of countries who looked to Moscow not only for military and economic support but for ideological guidance." This ideological commitment to revolutionary Marxism in turn explains why after World War II the Soviet Union, rather than simply establishing a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, forcibly imposed Communist totalitarian regimes based on the Soviet model throughout that region.¹⁴

It is worth noting that revisionist scholars writing about Vietnam are hardly alone in affirming this view of the Cold War. Many experts on Soviet history or Marxism with no involvement in the Vietnam debate have argued much the same thing. None has done so more trenchantly than the distinguished historian of Russia Martin Malia. For Malia, the Soviet Union was the fountainhead of international Marxism whose mission was nothing less than world revolution and the destruction of those nations and societies standing in the way of that revolution. This mission gave the Soviet regime, from its founding in 1917, a unique foreign policy that permitted temporary truces but not permanent peace with its capitalist adversaries. Hence the nature of the Cold War, a struggle with the highest possible stakes in which conventional strategic assumptions about defining and defending American national interests did not always apply:

The Cold War . . . became the Third World War that never took place. But it was a real world war all the same, with stakes as high as in its two predecessors. Since this war could not be waged in actual battles, it was fought through endless logistical preparations for these non-battles – the increasing refinement of nuclear and conventional weapons, the building of permanent alliances within each bloc, and rival programs of economic aid to Third World clients. Even more of a novelty, this contest was not about tangible national interests. Russia and America certainly had no conflicting territorial or economic interests; and Russia and the states of Western Europe, once partition of the continent had given Moscow an ample security glacis, were in a similar relationship.

The source of the conflict, rather, was ideological, or, in Moscow's terminology, "the international class struggle between the two social systems." Indeed, the

¹⁴ Michael Lind, *Vietnam, The Necessary War* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 4–5, 62–66.

Cold War is *the* great example in modern history of the power of “irrational,” cultural forces in international affairs . . . [T]he Cold War continued the prewar anomaly of Soviet Russia’s dual nature as both a sovereign state and the leader of an international revolutionary movement, an anomaly magnified many times over by the Soviet Union’s new status as a superpower.¹⁵

It is against this background that the strategic importance of Vietnam emerges. The “third world war of the twentieth century,” Lind notes, aside from its particular ideological component, differed crucially in a military sense from the two world wars that preceded it. This, of course, was because of nuclear weapons, which required the superpowers to avoid a direct military conflict lest they risk a general war and mutual annihilation. That in turn precluded any effort to break the deadlock that by the late 1940s existed in Europe, the “primary front” of the Cold War. Direct confrontations, including proxy wars and other duels of various sorts, therefore had to be relegated to “peripheral areas,” one of which turned out to be Indochina, and in particular the country that after 1954 was known as South Vietnam. Indochina was not the only area in Asia that, while peripheral in a conventional strategic sense, became a Cold War battleground. Mao Zedong, the leader of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and thus a speaker of some authority on the subject, argued that there were three Cold War “fronts” in Asia, territories where Communist and non-Communist countries faced each other directly across a contested border: Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. And that is precisely what gave them a strategic significance far beyond what they normally would have merited in terms of conventional geographic, economic, military, or political considerations. As Lind observes, “These three regions were not contested because they were important. *They were important because they were contested.*”¹⁶

As to why, Lind turns for an explanation to the lessons of history and the nature of how states behave in the anarchic international system. Following Norman Podhoretz, author of *Why We Were in Vietnam* (1982), Lind draws on the “lesson of Munich” – a reference to what happened after the 1938 international conference in that German city when the leaders of Great Britain and France attempted to avoid war with Nazi Germany by caving in to Hitler’s territorial demands on

¹⁵ Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 352–54, 359–60.

¹⁶ Lind, *Vietnam, The Necessary War*, 4–5, 64–66.

Czechoslovakia. The catastrophe of appeasement at Munich – the weakness of Europe’s leading democracies emboldened Hitler, who soon made additional territorial demands that led directly to World War II – had an impact that outlasted World War II. On several occasions during the Cold War, American leaders, beginning with President Harry Truman, cited Munich and its consequences to justify resisting aggression early. The objective was to act when the possibility of deterrence – as in Greece in 1947 – or at least avoiding a general war – as in the case of Korea in 1950 – still existed, rather than attempting to appease aggressive nations by retreating, only to be forced to fight a major war later under less favorable conditions. This application of the lesson of Munich to South Vietnam, Lind insists, was valid. Lind acknowledges that no analogy of this sort is “perfect” and stresses that in applying the Munich lesson to Vietnam it is not Ho Chi Minh’s North Vietnam that plays the role of Hitler’s Nazi Germany. That role belongs to North Vietnam’s totalitarian sponsors, the Soviet Union and the PRC, which together were attempting to subvert the West wherever they could. Ho himself was merely an ally or client of the two Communist superpowers, much as Franco and Mussolini were to Hitler in the 1930s.¹⁷ Podhoretz sums up this matter well:

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 already had been applied successfully in Western Europe in the forties and Korea in the fifties. Surely it was applicable to Vietnam as well.¹⁸

Again, one does not have to rely on revisionist Vietnam historians to back up this assessment. As historian Qiang Zhai documents in *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (2000), China began sending large quantities of aid to Ho’s military forces as early as April 1950, just months after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) won its civil war in China. Mao did so even as he was consolidating his party’s rule in China because, Qiang notes, he was “determined to transform not only China but also the world.” Nor, as would later happen, was Mao thinking and acting in more radical ways than other CCP leaders. He in fact was following an internal party directive dating from March 1950 that called for the PRC to “assist in every possible way the Communist parties and people in all

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41–43; Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 11–12.

¹⁸ Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam*, 11.

oppressed nations in Asia to win their liberation.” The CCP’s second in command, Liu Shaoqi, had already made essentially the same point in a public address delivered in November 1949 to Communists from several countries; its publication in January 1950 in *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), as Qiang observes, “confirm[ed] Stalin’s approval” for all to read. Whatever problems developed later between Communism’s two great powers – which in February 1950 signed their Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance – Qiang maintains that there was “an international division of labor within the Communist world at this time.” Stalin thus informed Liu in July 1949 that the center of world revolution had moved eastward to Asia, and while the Soviet Union would carry the major burden of promoting revolution in the West, he expected his Chinese comrades to do the same in the colonial and semicolonial countries.¹⁹

This in turn brings the revisionist case to the argument over the so-called domino theory and the closely related question of the importance of American credibility and the ultimate course of the Cold War. While the actual term “domino theory” was Eisenhower’s 1954 metaphor, the concept, and, more significantly, its role in US foreign policy, dates from the years immediately after World War II. The concern that the fall of one country to Communism could precipitate the fall of vulnerable neighboring countries as well was central to President Truman’s decisions to support the non-Communist government of Greece against a Communist insurgency in 1947 and to send American troops to defend South Korea after that country was invaded by North Korea in 1950. Today both of those decisions are widely viewed as having been correct, even though neither the Greek nor South Korean governments had serious democratic credentials at the time. Although most orthodox historians in the Vietnam debate reject the domino theory, both with regard to its application during the Cold War in general and to Vietnam in particular, many revisionist historians vigorously defend its validity. They do so with regard to Truman’s decision to aid the French in 1950, the far more significant decision to become directly involved in Vietnam by the Eisenhower administration during 1954–1955, and the even more serious decisions in terms of their ultimate impact by both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson that deepened US involvement in the early and mid-1960s.

¹⁹ Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 20–24.

Thus Mark Moyar, author of *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965*, points out that when Truman decided to aid the French in Vietnam there already were Communist insurgencies in Malaya, Burma, and Indonesia, and contemporary developments “readily supported the domino theory.”²⁰ Moving forward in time, he adds that had the United States not continued its commitment to South Vietnam in 1965, Laos, Thailand, Burma, and Malaysia were “dominoes likely to fall first,” while Cambodia and Indonesia were already “tipping forward.” This was a concern not only in Washington but in other national capitals as well. The list of countries at that time supporting American efforts on behalf of South Vietnam included Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea, the Philippines, Burma, Taiwan (the Republic of China), and India in Asia; most of the countries of the NATO alliance, including Great Britain and West Germany; and, in the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand.²¹ Nor does the fact that Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, and Indonesia did not fall to Communism in 1975 when South Vietnam finally succumbed invalidate the domino theory since by then those four countries had evolved to the point where they were strong enough to resist Communist pressures and were, in a sense, no longer dominos. In fact, two small dominoes did fall in 1975, as Communist forces triumphed in both Laos and Cambodia. As Moyar concludes, “An assessment of the domino theory, therefore, demands a close investigation of the dominoes and the would-be topplers in 1965, not 1975.”²²

In the revisionist narrative the domino theory in turn is linked to the broader issue of American credibility, not only in Southeast Asia but also worldwide, and thus to matters of strategic importance in the Cold War as a whole. In terms of Southeast Asia, Smith points out that by the early 1960s an American defeat in Vietnam would have been viewed by other countries in the region “as evidence of a lack of commitment to South-East Asia as a whole.” In other words, “What was at stake was not merely the future of South Vietnam but that of Indonesia and the whole region.” As for the argument that South Vietnam was the wrong place to demonstrate that commitment, Smith responds – having noted earlier that Truman’s “emergency” decision to help the French was made under conditions that were not “the ideal state of affairs” – that in turning to

²⁰ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 377–88.

²² *Ibid.*, 378–79, 388. See also Moyar, “Section III Response,” in *Triumph Revisited*, 205.

a strategy of counterinsurgency to defeat Communist guerrillas in South Vietnam, President Kennedy was “responding to a situation where most of the initiative lay with the Communist side.” Smith points out that the struggle in Vietnam could have been avoided only “by surrender,” an option he notes likewise was available, and rejected, in the case of Korea. Smith therefore concludes that the war in Vietnam was fought because “that was where the challenge arose, at a moment when Kennedy could not ignore that challenge.”²³

Lewy likewise stresses that the issue of credibility actually was global in extent. For example, he argues that along with President Kennedy’s promise to defend West Berlin and his stand against the Soviet attempt to station missiles in Cuba, his decision to stand firm in Indochina was meant to demonstrate American resolve and thereby discourage Soviet expansionist pressures elsewhere.²⁴ The issue of American credibility worldwide being at stake in South Vietnam was well understood by Johnson and his key advisors. One of the best-known and most frequently quoted memos of that era, written in 1965 by Defense Department official John McNaughton, stressed that 70 percent of US aims in Indochina were to “avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor).”²⁵ Lewy also approaches the importance of credibility in another way. He argues that once three American presidents (Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson) had committed the United States to defending the independence of South Vietnam, that in itself created a vital national interest given the importance of a great power’s prestige and credibility.²⁶ Actually, Henry Kissinger made the same point back in 1969, just as he was assuming the post of national security advisor to Richard Nixon and, with it, the burden of unraveling a knot others had tied. As Kissinger saw it:

But the commitment of 500,000 Americans has settled the issue of the importance of Viet Nam. For what is involved now is the confidence in American promises. However fashionable it is to ridicule the terms “credibility” and “prestige,” they are not empty phrases; other nations can gear their actions to ours only if they can count on our steadiness. The collapse of the American effort in Viet Nam would not mollify many critics . . . Those whose safety or national goals depend on American commitments could only be dismayed . . . Unilateral withdrawal, or

²³ Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, vol. 2, 14, 359; R. B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, vol. 1: *Revolution Versus Containment, 1955–1961* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983), 261. The comments on Truman are from vol. 1, 36–38.

²⁴ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 420. ²⁵ Cited in Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War*, 41.

²⁶ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 425.

a settlement which unintentionally amounts to the same thing, could therefore lead to the erosion of restraints and to an even more dangerous international situation. No American policymaker can simply dismiss these dangers.²⁷

In Lind's telling, the most important thing at stake for the United States in Vietnam was its credibility as a military power and reliable ally, which had to be demonstrated globally to friend and foe alike. The greatest danger for the United States was that if the Soviet Union and China could enable one of their client states to destroy an American protectorate, they would be "dangerously emboldened" while some American allies and neutral countries would be intimidated and decide their best option was to appease one of the two Communist great powers. This "bandwagon effect" might well have undermined the unity and strength of America's relationship with Great Britain, France, West Germany, and its other democratic allies and thereby negated what Lind calls "the first condition of western success in the Cold War."²⁸ In particular, West Germany and Japan might have turned to neutrality had they lost faith in America's commitment to defend their fundamental interests. In short, the loss of US credibility and the resultant bandwagon effect could have changed the ultimate resolution of the Cold War as a whole. In this regard Lind concludes:

The Cold War was most likely to end with a rapid and more or less bloodless diplomatic realignment in favor of the superpower that was perceived as the most militarily powerful and most politically determined. We know this is how the Cold War would have ended had the United States lost, because this is how it ended when the Soviet Union lost.²⁹

On this point, it is interesting to note the irony that the single most compelling, and dramatic, vindication of the domino theory – and its link with great power credibility – involves not non-Communist states falling one after another to Communism but the very opposite: Communist regimes toppling in rapid succession after one of them succumbed to democracy. This is what happened to the Soviet Union's system of satellite states in Eastern Europe, where Communist dictatorships had been imposed by Stalin in the aftermath of World War II, an act of expansionism that in fact started the Cold War. These regimes never succeeded in winning legitimacy and survived only because they were backed by Soviet

²⁷ Henry Kissinger, "The Viet Nam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs* 47, no. 2 (January 1969): 218–19.

²⁸ Lind, *Vietnam, The Necessary War*, 38–39.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 54–58. The quotation is on page 54.

military might. Indeed, it took Soviet threats to preserve Poland's Communist regime on several occasions beginning in 1956 as well as direct military intervention to preserve the Communist regimes in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Still, whatever its chronic troubles, the Soviet satellite system stood intact for four decades. Then a process of collapse took place over a matter of months during 1989, the so-called Year of the People.

The collapse began, as might have been expected, in Poland, whose Communist regime tottered in April and then collapsed in August in the face of mass popular opposition and the withdrawal of support by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who as part of his reform effort at home was determined to end the Soviet Union's long confrontation with the West. Gorbachev's willingness to allow Poland's Communist regime to be swept away simultaneously swept away Soviet credibility as the defender of last resort of any of these satellite regimes, despite the fact that Soviet troops were stationed in every one of them except Romania. The consequences came quickly. The collapse of Communism spread from Poland to Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and, finally, Romania. By the end of December, the entire Soviet system of satellite Communist regimes was gone. The postwar wave of Communist expansion that had given birth to containment four decades earlier finally receded, and since Moscow had made no effort to prevent that reversal, the Cold War was over.

Two other dominoes of sorts, the militant Communist regime in Albania (which rejected both the Soviet and Chinese versions of communism as insufficiently pure) and the neutralist semi-Communist regime in Yugoslavia, remained precariously upright until 1991, when they also fell. By then the Soviet Union, the main block of the system that had supported all the rest, itself was being whittled down into a domino by the combination of its internal weaknesses and Gorbachev's reforms and was beginning to shake and tilt. In December 1991 it keeled over and broke into fifteen parts, the largest of which became the Russian Federation. An imposing and highly symbolic physical domino also went down as part of this continental Communist collapse, the Berlin Wall, which Germans living to its west as well as its east finally breached and began to dismantle on November 9, 1989.

Vietnamese Nationalism, Ho Chi Minh, and Ngo Dinh Diem

One reason the revisionists can justify and defend the application of containment to Vietnam is that they generally reject two key orthodox premises about Vietnamese nationalism. They are that Ho Chi Minh and his Communist colleagues in Vietnam were nationalists first and Communists second and that there was no viable alternative to their version of Vietnamese nationalism.

The first premise, revisionists argue, is inconsistent with the historical record on two counts: Ho Chi Minh's personal career and how under his leadership the Vietnamese Communists treated other Vietnamese political groups. To be sure, Ho, who lived abroad for three decades after 1911, began his political career as a nationalist. However, by 1921 he had become a committed Marxist-Leninist who loyally and without question served the Third International (or Comintern), the worldwide organization of Communist parties controlled from Moscow, as a full-time agent. Ho served the Comintern in several Asian locales before finally returning to his own country during World War II to direct the struggle for Communism there. In fact, in 1930, just a few months after he presided over the formation of the Vietnamese Communist Party, on Comintern orders Ho did the same for fellow Communists from Siam (today, Thailand) and Malaya. For Ho and his colleagues, the struggle to drive the French from Vietnam and then to unite the country under Communist rule was part of a larger and primary effort to promote a world Communist revolution. As Smith points out, the "nationalism" of Ho and his fellow Vietnamese Communists "found expression in a sense of pride that the Vietnamese revolution has been of major historical significance" in the international struggle against capitalism.³⁰ As for non-Communist Vietnamese nationalist groups, from the early 1920s onward Ho fought them ruthlessly from abroad, and he continued to do so upon his return to Vietnam. This did not change after Ho, always acting on Comintern orders, in 1941 formed the Vietnamese Independence League (Vietminh), a supposedly broad-based organization committed to securing independence from France that in fact was under tight Communist control. Ho and the Vietminh had the blood of tens of thousands of non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists on their hands before they started their rebellion against French colonial rule in December 1946, hardly

³⁰ Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, vol. 1, 10.

a record characteristic of people who were nationalists first and Communists second. The case against the “nationalists first, Communists second” thesis is further strengthened by two sets of policies: what Ho and his colleagues did after their victory over the French and the establishment of North Vietnam in 1954, beginning with their brutal “land reform” campaign that led to the deaths of thousands of peasants; and, after Ho’s death, what his successors did after the victory that brought all of Vietnam under their control in 1975.

The second premise likewise does not stand up to the historical record, as there was no shortage of alternatives to the Vietminh’s Communism-first version of Vietnamese nationalism. Non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists came in many forms and, to be sure, often were hostile to one another and varied in their popular appeal and long-term viability. What they had in common was a degree of loyalty to traditional Vietnamese society and culture, an attitude the revolutionary Communists, with their determination to bring a totally new way of life to Vietnam, did not share. That the Vietminh considered some of these rival political groups serious potential challengers, in contrast to what many orthodox historians have maintained, is demonstrated by the reign of terror and murder Ho’s minions waged against their non-Communist nationalist countrymen during 1945 and 1946, before the war of independence against the French.

In considering America’s involvement in Vietnam, the key question with regard to Vietnamese nationalism is whether any of the South Vietnamese regimes after 1954, beginning with that of Ngo Dinh Diem, were viable. Historian Keith W. Taylor has observed that the “war of 1955–1975 was a war between two Vietnamese versions of the future of the country,” and he is among those who argue that the non-Communist version that existed in South Vietnam during those years was both legitimate and had a chance of success.³¹ Others – from Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Marguerite Higgins, who covered events in Vietnam from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s; to historian Ellen Hammer, one of the first American scholars to become a specialist on Vietnamese history back in the 1950s; to William Colby, who served in South Vietnam in several major civilian positions, knew Diem well, and eventually headed the CIA; to historian Mark Moyar, author of *Triumph Forsaken* – have over the years provided considerable evidence

³¹ Keith W. Taylor, “The Vietnamese Civil War in Historical Perspective,” in *Triumph Revisited*, 18, 27. The quotation is on page 18.

for the viability of the Diem regime in particular and/or that of non-Communist Vietnamese nationalism in general. Diem himself, whatever his flaws, far from being a rigid and inept reactionary isolated from the Vietnamese people, emerges in these authors' discussions as a genuine nationalist and modernizer who understood South Vietnam and the problems it faced better than his American critics. Interestingly, Moyar cites recent scholarship by orthodox historians who have focused on Diem and his regime, while acknowledging that their ultimate conclusions differ from his, to back up his positive assessment of Diem and the regime he led.³²

Any assessment of the viability of the Diem regime must consider the origins of the Communist insurgency against it that began in the late 1950s. The revisionist position on the question of the origins of the insurgency in South Vietnam is reasonably well summed up by the title of a State Department white paper issued in 1965: *Aggression from the North: The Record of North Vietnam's Campaign to Conquer South Vietnam*. The case that the insurgency was initiated and controlled by Hanoi from the very beginning has been made repeatedly, more recently with the benefit of new and formidable documentation from Communist sources, by revisionist commentators from Guenter Lewy to Mark Moyar.³³

The subject of non-Communist and anti-Communist Vietnamese nationalism through Ngo Dinh Diem's time in power will be reviewed in greater detail in Chapters 3 and 4. Later governments, in particular the one led by Nguyen Van Thieu, will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

³² See Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare: The Story of U.S. Involvement in the Vietnamese Tragedy with Thoughts on a Future Policy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); Ellen Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987); William Colby, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989); and Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*. For more recent and more positive overviews of Diem than the entirely negative one-dimensional view normally provided by orthodox historians, see Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002) and Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

³³ United State Department of State, *Aggression from the North: The Record of North Vietnam's Campaign to Conquer South Vietnam* (Washington, DC: US Department of State Publication 7839, Far Eastern Series 130, February 1965); Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 10–18; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 79–86.

The American Military Effort in Vietnam

As already noted, revisionist commentators often disagree on how the United States should have fought the Vietnam War. They cite a variety of military errors the United States allegedly made in Vietnam, sometimes disagreeing about what they were and, if in agreement on that point, assigning different levels of importance to errors they agree were made. While this complicates any effort to explain how the United States could have been successful in its military effort, it does not invalidate the thesis that the war could have been won at a cost far less than was incurred in defeat. Perhaps more to the point, there is not necessarily only one strategy that can be used to win a given war. For example, at various points during World War II several military strategies were available to the United States and its allies to achieve victory, in both the European and Pacific theaters. This was understood at the time and remains the prevailing outlook in retrospect. It also is generally accepted that had the Allies made certain strategic errors – or had Nazi Germany avoided certain strategic errors – the war could have ended differently, with dreadful implications for freedom in the world. As Richard Overy has stressed, “Though from today’s perspective the Allied victory might seem somehow inevitable, the conflict was poised on a knife’s edge in the middle years of the war.”³⁴ One might add that Overy’s “knife’s edge” observation can be applied to many other wars, including World War I, the American war of independence, and the US Civil War. In the case of Vietnam, a strong case can be made that, first, the overall American strategic approach to the war was seriously flawed and, second, there were a variety of options that the United States did not take that plausibly could have brought success. Thus C. Dale Walton argues in *The Myth of Inevitable Defeat in Vietnam* that “there were numerous roads to victory, but . . . Washington chose none of them.”³⁵ The result, according to military historian and Army lieutenant colonel Robert E. Morris, was “one of the most inept military campaigns in history.”³⁶

³⁴ Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: Norton, 1996), 325. Overy also notes that to win World War II “the Allies had to learn to fight more effectively,” an observation that can easily be applied to Vietnam. With regard to individual battles, with the battles of Midway and Stalingrad in mind, Overy writes, “Battles are not preordained. If they were, no one would bother to fight them.” See pages 317 and 320.

³⁵ Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam*, 2.

³⁶ Robert E. Morris, “Why We Lost the War in Vietnam: An Analysis,” in *The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War: Reflections Twenty-Five Years After the Fall of Saigon*, eds. John Norton Moore and Robert F. Turner (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), 385.

The Rationalist Approach, Systems Analysis, Graduated Pressure, and Gradual Escalation

In the welter of disagreement that characterizes the revisionist analysis of the American military effort in Vietnam, the premise that probably enjoys the most support is that the policy of gradual escalation, the approach to the war followed under President Lyndon Johnson, was a fatal and inexcusable blunder. Gradual escalation was the fundamental principle that guided American military policy after the overthrow of the Diem regime in 1963. Indeed, to the extent the United States had a strategy for fighting in Vietnam, gradual escalation was it. It evolved out of the concept of “limited war,” a popular concept among social scientists and academics during the 1950s and 1960s, in large part because of the understandable fear that a military conflict between nuclear powers could lead to a total war of nuclear annihilation. Crises therefore had to be prevented from escalating out of control. Limited war, like any other doctrine, came in many versions, and it did not necessarily imply the policy of gradualism ultimately used in Vietnam. For example, General Mathew Ridgway, a World War II veteran who led U.N. forces in Korea after 1951 and who later became the US Army chief of staff, thought of limited war as nonnuclear war. In his view, and to many others of similar mind, there was no contradiction between fighting a limited war while also using decisive military force to achieve the desired objectives. In sharp contrast, as political scientist Christopher M. Gacek points out, certain civilian writers argued for strategies “in which the means used in war were kept below a specified level and decisive military victory was not necessarily achieved or sought.”³⁷

Prominent civilian limited war advocates often drew heavily on what is known as systems analysis: studying the purposes and goals of an

³⁷ Christopher M. Gacek, *The Logic of Force: The Dilemma of Limited War in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 143–44. Total war is a conflict in which the entire resources and populations of the combatants are committed to winning a complete victory, with the result that the distinction between civilian and soldier is eliminated and the former become legitimate military targets. It is a term that most frequently is applied to the two world wars of the twentieth century. Military historians agree that, with a few exceptions, pre-twentieth-century wars were limited wars. The fear after World War II was that a total, or nuclear, war between the United States and the Soviet Union would destroy civilization. See Hugh Bicheno, “Total War,” *The Oxford Companion to Military History*, eds. Richard Holmes, Hew Strachan, and Chris Bellamy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Available online at www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780198606963.001.0001/a-cref-9780198606963-e-1290?rsk=ue99ht&result=1304

institution or procedure to create systems that will achieve those objectives efficiently. Systems analysis in turn draws heavily from the economic concept of “cost-benefit analysis.” The result of applying systems analysis to matters of war is what defense analyst Gregory Palmer calls the “rationalist approach” to national defense policy. The most influential advocate of this way of thinking in the government was Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who brought several limited war theorists to the Pentagon when he took office in 1961. These theorists argued that actors in a military conflict acted rationally. This meant that they could be restrained by a limited use of force that, as it was increased in a precisely calibrated and focused manner, would demonstrate to them that promoting a conflict was against their interests. This cost-benefit analysis mode of thinking therefore would allow the United States to apply “maximum pressure with minimum risk” on North Vietnam. The object of this gradually increasing pressure, Palmer explains, was to “affect the calculations of future costs and benefits being made in Hanoi in a way that the best possible ratio of costs and benefits would be obtained by ceasing to support the Vietcong.”³⁸ In other words, McNamara and his colleagues in Washington assumed that the Communist leaders in Hanoi thought and made decisions about their effort to conquer South Vietnam in the same way as American bureaucrats did in managing the Pentagon. Therefore by gradually increasing military pressure, initially through the use of air power and then, when that did not produce the desired results, by introducing US combat forces into the mix (although air attacks on North Vietnam clearly remained the main method of applying pressure on Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues), Washington could convince Hanoi that the cost of its effort to conquer South Vietnam outweighed the benefits of

³⁸ Gregory Palmer, *The McNamara Strategy and the Vietnam War: Program Budgeting in the Pentagon, 1960–1968* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1978), 3–7, 108–12. The basis of McNamara’s war planning was the Planning Programming Budgeting System that he brought to the Pentagon upon becoming secretary of defense in 1961. It was based on the thinking of a small group of economists at the Rand Corporation who are sometimes referred to as “the defense economists.” See Palmer, pages 3–7. See also Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 306. Moyar mentions Thomas Schelling’s *Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960) as the “most influential” book produced by limited war theorists. Schelling was a professor at Harvard University at the time. Colonel Harry G. Summers calls a volume published about a decade later, Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith *How Much Is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program, 1961–1969* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1971), the “bible of the limited war theorists.” See Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1982), 77.

unifying Vietnam under Communist rule. Having reached that conclusion Hanoi would abandon that effort.

McNamara's approach to the war in Vietnam grew out of his jaundiced view of traditional military thinking. As military historian Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster has noted, McNamara and his advisors were "convinced that traditional military conceptions of the use of force were irrelevant to contemporary strategic and political realities." McNamara's confidence that he and other civilian advocates of what he called "graduated pressure" in Vietnam were better qualified to craft a strategy for coping with the situation there was reinforced by the Kennedy administration's handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. In particular President Kennedy had rejected military advice from the Joint Chiefs of Staff for an attack against Soviet missiles being installed in Cuba in favor of blockading Cuba and gradually increasing the pressure on Soviet leaders in Moscow, an approach that McNamara and other top Kennedy advisors argued was the key to the peaceful resolution of the crisis. McNamara's assessment of the Cuban Missile Crisis has merits, although some scholars assign less credit to graduated pressure for resolving the crisis than does McNamara.³⁹ Whatever one's assessment of that crisis, McNamara apparently did not allow two important considerations to influence his assessment of what would work for the United States in Vietnam: first, that the Cuban Missile Crisis was a diplomatic confrontation in which the goal was to defuse a crisis and avoid a nuclear war while in Vietnam a war involving conventional and guerrilla forces already was

³⁹ H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 62; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, pp. 306–7. Moyar's sources on this point are two books published in the mid-1990s: Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996) and Aleksandr Fursenko, "'One Hell of a Gamble': Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964" (New York and London: Norton, 1997). McNamara's recounting of his own role in the Cuban Missile Crisis is not consistent with some important evidence: the tape recordings of the meetings of the ExComm, the committee of top officials that Kennedy formed to advise him during the crisis. See Sheldon M. Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myth Versus Reality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012). Stern, formerly the historian at the John F. Kennedy Library and the leading expert on the tapes, characterizes McNamara's conduct and advice during those meetings as "erratic and inconsistent" (56). McNamara's exact phrase was "Graduated Overt Military Pressure." See Robert McNamara, "Memo for the President," March 16, 1964, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam, Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972): 1: 499–510.

going on; and, second, that the relationship of the Soviet Union to Cuba and the Soviet stake in keeping nuclear missiles in Cuba bore no resemblance to relationship between North Vietnam and South Vietnam and North Vietnam's determination to control all of Vietnam. Rather, the outlook of McNamara and his colleagues was as described in 1970 by Cyrus Vance, who held high positions under both Kennedy and Johnson: "We had seen the gradual application of force applied in the Cuban Missile Crisis and had seen a very successful result. We believed that, if this same gradual and restrained application of force were applied in South Vietnam, that one could expect the same result."⁴⁰

McNamara was not entirely without professional military support for his policy of graduated pressure. His most important backer by far was General Maxwell Taylor, who served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Kennedy and Johnson from 1962 to 1964 and then as ambassador to South Vietnam from 1964 to 1965.⁴¹ Taylor in effect became an advocate of limited war during the 1950s when he criticized the Eisenhower policy of relying on the threat of massive nuclear retaliation to contain the Soviet Union. Taylor advocated what he called "flexible response," which meant having sufficient conventional military forces available to meet Soviet challenges at any level to ensure that no conflict or crisis would escalate into a disastrous nuclear exchange. Among the American politicians Taylor impressed was Senator John F. Kennedy, and flexible response became the term that Kennedy would use when he became president in 1961 to describe his overall strategy for containing Communism. That said, McMaster points out that flexible response as initially conceived did not mandate graduated pressure when dealing with a particular military crisis; rather, it advocated applying military force at a necessary and appropriate level. In contrast, graduated pressure meant beginning the application of force at a low level and gradually increasing its scale and intensity. While Taylor's advice changed as the situation changed in Vietnam, his notion of applying flexible response to Vietnam during the 1960s generally paralleled McNamara's notion of graduated pressure, a position that put him out of step with the other Joint Chiefs. Thus in 1965,

⁴⁰ Quoted in McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 62.

⁴¹ Taylor compiled a distinguished record during World War II, including commanding the Army's 101st Airborne Division. He served in Korea and as army chief of staff from 1955 to 1959. His book, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (1960), outlined his critique of massive retaliation and ideas about flexible response.

according to the *New York Times*, Taylor stated that “our objective is limited – namely, to oblige Hanoi, to persuade Hanoi, to desist in its efforts to maintain an insurgency.” A year later he testified at a Senate hearing that rather than trying to defeat North Vietnam the United States was trying to “cause them to mend their ways.”⁴²

When it came to defending South Vietnam from Communism in practice, the rationalist approach to war and its corollary graduated pressure gave birth to gradual escalation. Gradual escalation was the policy of the Johnson administration beginning in 1965 once it committed US forces to fighting directly in Vietnam, a policy that lasted amid stalemate and criticism until 1968. One of the most effective and best-known critics of the rationalist approach to war in general and its offspring of gradual escalation in Vietnam in particular is Colonel Harry Summers. Summers’s critique of the American effort in Vietnam is based on the ideas of the renowned nineteenth-century German military thinker Carl von Clausewitz (and in particular his classic treatise *On War*). Summers grants that McNamara’s system of running the Pentagon, officially known as the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS), was useful as a means of making the Defense Department more efficient in managing its resources, that is, in preparing for war. The trouble is that the PPBS approach was “only half the equation.” Summers stresses the crucial distinction between what Clausewitz called “preparation for war” and “war proper” and argues that while PPBS was “efficient in structuring forces in preparing for war, it was neither designed for, nor was it capable of, fighting the war itself.”⁴³ Clausewitz had no use for theorists who “aimed to equip the conduct of war with principles, rules, or even systems, and thus considered only factors that could be mathematically calculated (e.g., numerical superiority; supply; the base; interior lines).” He argued that rules and systems do not work because “they aim at fixed values. In war everything is uncertain and variable, intertwined with psychological forces and effects, and the product of a continuous interaction of opposites.” Yet rules and systems were the basis for what Summers calls “the theory of graduated response,” which he states had “a devastating effect” on the US military effort in Vietnam.⁴⁴

⁴² Taylor quoted in Gacek, *Logic of Force*, 198 and 143; McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 74.

⁴³ Summers, *On Strategy*, 75.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 74, 80–82, 163. Summers uses a different translation of the Clausewitz’s work than the one cited here. I have used this one, which comes from the translation of *On War* by

Other revisionist commentators have pointed out the same thing with different words. According to Robert E. Morris, gradual escalation “violated a fundamental precept of waging war,” which, he argues, is to dislocate and destroy the willpower of the enemy. Military strategy, Morris continues, must be designed “to meet the enemy with overwhelming force . . . [that] finally destroys their will to fight.” But gradual escalation meant that the United States did not employ the force required to break North Vietnam’s will to fight. America’s gradual increase in its use of force enabled North Vietnam to engage in “a total effort that matched our buildup.”⁴⁵ And that, according to Admiral U. S. Grant Sharpe, who was in overall command of US forces in the Pacific (including Vietnam) from 1964 to 1968, was why graduated pressure under President Johnson failed. Sharpe complains that American military leaders during the war “were never allowed to move decisively with our tremendous air and naval power.” It was, he continues, “folly” for the United States to commit troops to combat and then not use the means it had to win an “early victory.” Instead of using the means that could have produced such a victory, the United States “increased the pressure on North Vietnam in a series of nibbles that permitted them to build up their defenses and to anticipate every move we made.” Or as General Philip Davidson, who served from 1967 to 1969 as chief US intelligence officer in South Vietnam, has noted, the policy of gradualism “played into the hands of Giap [Vo Nguyen Giap, North Vietnam’s leading general and strategist] and his strategy of revolutionary war.” It allowed Giap to prolong the war, strengthen North Vietnam’s forces, and at the same time erode American morale and will. As for the “signals” the United States assumed it was sending to Hanoi, in fact they were read there as a “sign of weakness or lack of national resolve.” At home, as the war dragged on, these “signals” helped convince the American people that the war was

Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, 84) because I believe it is clearer. It may be found online at The Clausewitz Homepage (www.clausewitz.com/readings/Cquotations.htm). Summers’s translation of these passages is on page 82 of *On Strategy*.

⁴⁵ Robert E. Morris, “Why We Lost the War in Vietnam,” 390–91. It is important to understand that there is no contradiction between the use of overwhelming force and another classic principle of warfare, what Gregory Palmer, following Clausewitz, calls “economy of force.” It states that the “minimum possible force should be used in obtaining an objective.” See Gregory Palmer, *The McNamara Strategy*, 18–19. The problem is that gradual escalation made it impossible to achieve victory and over time forced the United States to resort to more and more force in a fruitless endeavor.

unwinnable and should be abandoned.⁴⁶ Dale Walton, in discussing the air campaign against North Vietnam, argues that by attempting to implement “the seemingly elegant theory of graduated pressure, US policy makers outsmarted themselves” because they did not attack the appropriate targets and thereby hamstrung the entire effort.⁴⁷

McMaster makes an important point by viewing graduated pressure from the North Vietnamese side. He points out that while McNamara and his colleagues considered the carefully calibrated and therefore limited bombing raids on North Vietnam to be a form of “coercion and communication short of war,” to Ho and his comrades those attacks were acts of war. And war, McMaster stresses, following Summers’s use of Clausewitz against systems analysis, “unleashes a dynamic that defies systems analysis quantification.” In this case, McMaster observes, “linear thinking” prevented McNamara and his systems analysis advisors from understanding that they might not be able to predict the enemy’s reaction to graduated pressure, and hence the future course of events.⁴⁸ Interestingly, in 1969 General Giap himself echoed this critique when he noted that US strategy was based on “arithmetic.” American strategists, he said, “question the computers, add and subtract, extract square roots, and then go into action.” The problem for them was that “arithmetical strategy doesn’t work here. If it did, they’d already have exterminated us.”⁴⁹ As it turned out, McMaster concludes, North Vietnam’s response to Washington’s carefully calibrated graduated pressure during 1964 and 1965 – the infiltration of full divisions of the North Vietnamese army into South Vietnam – forced the United States to commit its own combat troops to the struggle, “precisely the action that graduated pressure was designed to avoid.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ U. S. Grant Sharpe, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael and London: Presidio Press, 1978), 2; Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946–1975* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 806–7.

⁴⁷ Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable US Defeat in Vietnam*, 110.

⁴⁸ McMaster, “Crack in the Foundation: Defense Transformation and the Underlying Assumption of Dominant Knowledge in Future War,” Center for Strategic Leadership, U.S. Army War College (November 2003, Volume SO3-03), 77–78.

⁴⁹ Quoted in James S. Robbins, *This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive* (New York and London: Encounter Books, 2010), 40. Regarding McNamara and his systems analysis experts, Robbins quotes John P. Roach, a special advisor to President Johnson from 1966 to 1968, to the effect “the problem with McNamara and Co. was that they could never distinguish between a war and a war game” (32).

⁵⁰ McMaster, “Crack in the Foundation,” 78.

It is ironic as well as instructive to read what Taylor had to say on this subject once the war had continued into the 1970s. By 1972 he was having what may be called “second thoughts” about gradualism. In his memoir (*Swords and Plowshares*, 1972), published before the United States withdrew its last combat forces from Vietnam, Taylor wrote, “carefully controlled violence . . . ended by defeating its own purposes. Designed to limit the dangers of expanded war, it ended by assuring a prolonged war which carried with it the dangers of expansion.” He added that gradualism “violated the military principles of surprise and mass as means to gain prompt success with minimum loss.” In short, long before McNamara repudiated his approach to the Vietnam War by penning *In Retrospect*, Taylor in his memoir acknowledged the shortcomings of gradual escalation.⁵¹ Commenting on how graduated escalation was actually implemented, Robert E. Morris takes the critique of that strategy one step further. He argues that in fact US policy was not, as advertised, “even gradual escalation; that is, a progressive and increasing application of force to strangle the enemy.” Rather it was a policy of “escalation and de-escalation, an ‘on again, off again’ knee-jerk reaction that varied with the intuitive whims of President Johnson and his advisors.”⁵² And those shortcomings, as Admiral Sharpe put it succinctly when he chose the title of his book on the war, were what made graduated escalation in Vietnam a “strategy for defeat.”

Gradual Escalation, Tet, Vietnamization, and the Abandonment of Vietnam

Gradual escalation and the events that occurred after it was abandoned will be covered in detail later in this volume. Although gradual escalation, which lasted from 1965 until 1968, had many facets, its two main pillars were the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign against North Vietnam (officially: Operation Rolling Thunder) and the search and destroy ground campaign against Communist forces in South Vietnam. Revisionist commentators generally agree on the faults of Rolling Thunder and on the reasons it failed, with the main culprits being President Johnson and

⁵¹ Quoted in Gacek, 400. Gacek notes that Taylor did not abandon the concept of limited war. That, however, is not a contradiction, as the views of General Matthew Ridgeway, among others, clearly demonstrate that limited war and gradualism in applying the use of force are far from the same thing.

⁵² Morris, “Why We Lost the War in Vietnam,” 391.

Secretary of Defense McNamara and the restrictions they placed on that campaign. Such a consensus does not exist with regard to search and destroy, which was devised by General William Westmoreland, commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) and therefore the commander of US forces in South Vietnam from 1964 to 1968. Instead, a variety of positions exist between two poles – one arguing that search and destroy did not respond properly to what was primarily a guerrilla insurgency and the other that it did not respond properly to what was primarily a conventional invasion – that in many ways are diametrically opposed to each other. A revisionist consensus emerges again regarding the 1968 Tet Offensive: that an overwhelming US/South Vietnamese military victory which should have been exploited was turned into a political defeat that in turn badly undermined the US effort in Vietnam. There is also a general, though hardly unanimous, consensus regarding Vietnamization, the overall policy of the Nixon administration from 1969 through the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973 that included the gradual withdrawal of US combat troops from South Vietnam. It is that in the wake of the Tet victory and by employing different tactics, the new team on the ground in South Vietnam of MACV commander General Creighton Abrams, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, and Bunker's deputy in charge of pacification William Colby achieved considerable success and that by 1972 the military and political situation favored the South Vietnamese government. However, because of what transpired beginning in 1973, following the title of Colby's book, the improved situation that existed in 1972 by 1975 was turned into a *Lost Victory*. Victory was lost because after Nixon's resignation the United States cut its support of the South Vietnamese government to the point where it was unable to bear the burden of resisting renewed North Vietnamese aggression, which was lavishly backed by the Soviet Union. In other words, as many revisionists put it, the United States "abandoned" South Vietnam. The result, and the title of the definitive book on the subject by George J. Veith (*Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973–1975*) was "Black April": the collapse of the South Vietnamese government and the unification of Vietnam under a one-party dictatorship that rules there to this day.