

Presidential Address
**Explaining Failure: The Forty-Year Debate
over the Vietnam War**

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Forty years ago this Spring, President Lyndon Johnson slowly took the United States to war in Vietnam. The American-supported government of South Vietnam was collapsing from internal dissensions and in the face of a determined communist insurgency. A decade of American economic and military assistance had failed to secure South Vietnam, which, in U.S. strategic thinking, was the first domino – a government whose fall to communism would trigger the collapse of pro-Western and neutralist nations throughout Southeast and South Asia. During the fateful months of February through July 1965, the war was Americanized. The first steps were portrayed by the Johnson administration as modest and restrained responses to mounting Viet Cong attacks. In February, Johnson had authorized Operation Rolling Thunder, the systematic bombing of North Vietnam. In March, he had approved the dispatch of the first ground combat troops, 3,500 marines to defend the air base at Danang. By early April, more troops had been sent to defend other bases and the combat mission had been extended to permit offensive operations. On this date in 1965 there was hope for avoiding further involvement, Johnson, speaking at Johns Hopkins University, had just made a dramatic appeal for peace, promising peace talks and offering a billion-dollar development project for the Mekong River Basin if North Vietnam would accept the independence of South Vietnam. Returning from Baltimore, Johnson told an advisor, “Old Ho Chi Minh can’t turn that down.” The North Vietnamese, however, rejected the overture, and the momentum for war was renewed. With the military leadership calling for more troops and with the fragile government of South Vietnam hanging in the balance, Johnson in ensuing weeks increased the American role. Finally, in late July 1965, he took the momentous step: an open-ended commitment that would eventually send over 500,000 American troops in Vietnam. The conflict was now an American war.

A sense of idealism and confidence accompanied those initial steps to war. Phil Caputo, who as a young Marine was among the first combat troops in March 1965, later recalled:

America seemed omnipotent then. The country could claim it had never lost a war, and we believed we were ordained to play cop to the Communists' robber and spread our own political faith all over the world. . . We saw ourselves as the champions of a cause that was destined to triumph. . . . So when we marched into the rice paddies on that March afternoon, we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that the Vietcong would be quickly beaten and that we were doing something altogether noble and good.

From the beginning, the intervention in Vietnam was controversial. While most Americans supported the war in 1965, nearly 30% thought that it was a mistake. The first campus teach-in – which involved having professors, students, and others discuss the issues of the war and which would become a common means of antiwar protest – was held as early as March 24, 1965 at the University of Michigan. Those protests increased as war went on without conclusive results and America found itself in a quagmire. The nation became more sharply divided than at any time since the Civil War. Antiwar demonstrations and marches spoke to the growing dissatisfaction. They were countered by pro-war demonstrators who called upon Americans to stay the course. After two-and-half years of escalating involvement and increasing casualties which produced not victory but stalemate, most Americans by late 1967 had come to believe that the war was a mistake and Lyndon Johnson's approval ratings plunged. The shock of the Tet Offensive in early 1968 accentuated the downward spiral. That year was marked by the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, by violence in the nation's cities and at the Democratic National Convention; it was a time when America seemed, to borrow the title of one important book, to be "coming apart."

To a remarkable extent, the divisions of the 1960s still cut through American society. The contemporary debates over U.S. national security policy reflect the legacy of the debate between "doves" and "hawks" and the cultural changes growing out of that debate. Supporters and opponents of the Persian Gulf War of 1991 and the current war in Iraq draw upon competing "lessons" of the Vietnam War. Supporters assure Americans that Vietnam taught the country's leaders how not to fight a war so that its strategic shortcomings will not be repeated. Opponents draw upon the Vietnam experience to warn of the dangers of attempting to find an American solution to the intractable political problems of distant peoples. A principal reason why Vietnam has remained so prominent in our political

discourse is because the outcome of the war seems preposterous: how could the world's most powerful nation fail to defeat a poor, pre-industrial Third World country? Lyndon Johnson could not understand it; he always referred to Vietnam as "that damned little puissant country."

At the center of the contemporary debate over Vietnam thus is the search for the war's "lessons." This is basically a quest to explain America's only lost war so that the misadventure will not be repeated. The debate over Vietnam ever since the 1960s has always been about explaining failure. While "doves" and "hawks" disagreed on whether the United States should have been fighting in Vietnam, they both saw the country headed to defeat. Failure was always fundamental to the dove argument which saw Americanization of the war as a mistake that was doomed from the outset. Hawks, of course, supported the war's objectives and believed that U.S. military power, properly applied, could force North Vietnam to abandon the struggle; but hawks became increasingly frustrated by what they considered to be a wrong-headed strategy which was insufficient to achieve military objectives and so they too anticipated failure.

During the war, a dovish perspective became the conventional wisdom among a steadily increasing number of intellectuals, journalists, and political leaders, who came to believe that America's decision to wage war in Vietnam was a tragic mistake. The commitment to South Vietnam had been a "fool's errand," a miscalculation by the nation's leaders that American security was at stake in Southeast Asia and that military power could save a weak and unpopular regime. Americans, doves believed, were ignoring history. The communist insurgency in South Vietnam, supported by North Vietnam, reflected the irresistible force of Vietnamese nationalism; it was Ho Chi Minh and his followers who had proclaimed Vietnam's independence and fought a successful war against the French; they thus had earned the support of people throughout the country. The South Vietnamese government traced its origins to the old French colonial regime and had survived after France's withdrawal only because of the support of the United States. It lacked credibility with its people. A leading expert on Vietnam, the journalist-scholar Bernard Fall, once observed the futile efforts of Saigon's government to rewrite history in ways that would establish its nationalist credentials: "So hoary a mythology is difficult to accept even by the peasants who comprise 90% of the population. They know full well who fought the French and who did not." With the North Vietnamese supporting the Southern insurgency and receiving extensive military and economic assistance from the Soviet Union and China, Ho Chi Minh's movement could outlast the Americans, just

as it had outlasted the French. The eight-year war of the French that failed to defeat the communist insurgents offered to doves a sobering lesson of the futility of Western powers to fight in the jungles of Southeast Asia. Hence, the war was fundamentally “unwinnable.” This dovish perspective on the war represents the beginning of the orthodox interpretation of the war. Its sense of a “fool’s errand” is reflected in the titles of representative books written during the war: *The Making of A Quagmire*, *Washington Plans An Aggressive War*, *The Abuse of Power*, *The Arrogance of Power*, *The Bitter Heritage*, and *The Lost Crusade*. The authors of these books included the journalist David Halberstam, the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and the prominent Senator, J. William Fulbright.

While the “doves” seemed in the political ascendancy, there remained a large number of Americans who continued to support the war; and there were still countless others who had become critical of the war and wanted it to end, but they did not want to see the United States defeated. Richard Nixon shrewdly exploited this undercurrent. If one had to pinpoint the moment when hawkishness became fashionable and when the conservative response to the counter-culture was clearly defined, it might well be November 1969 when President Nixon appealed for the support of what he famously called “the great silent majority.” Nixon had promised during the 1968 campaign to achieve “peace with honor” in Vietnam. He knew that anything short of an immediate withdrawal would trigger protests from the antiwar movement. He also recognized that most Americans wanted to leave Vietnam honorably and not in disgrace, and that most Americans were repelled by what they considered the excesses of the war protesters. Nixon, barely nine months into his presidency, addressed the nation from the Oval Office; he closed with a memorable peroration:

I know it may not be fashionable to speak of patriotism or national destiny these days. But I feel it is appropriate to do so on this occasion. . . . The wheel of destiny has turned so that any hope the world has for the survival of peace and freedom will be determined by whether the American people have the moral stamina and courage to meet the challenge of free-world leadership. Let historians not record that when America was the most powerful nation in the world we passed by on the other side of the road and allowed the last hopes for peace and freedom of millions of people to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism. And so tonight – to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans – I ask

for your support. I pledged in my campaign to end the war in a way that we could keep the peace. I have initiated a plan of action that will enable me to keep that pledge. The more support I can have from the American public, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed; for the more divided we are at home, the less likely the enemy is to negotiate with us at Paris. Let us be united for peace. Let us be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.

The appeal worked as the “great silent majority” gave Nixon the support that he sought in ending the war. Nixon went further, however, and reinforced the divisions within the country by lashing out against domestic opponents of the war. He described student protesters as a “bunch of bums.” He unleashed his Vice President Spiro Agnew to attack what the administration saw as media bias in reporting the war, Agnew’s denunciations of the allegedly liberal media included characterizing war critics as “the nattering nabobs of negativism.”

That “great silent majority” has become a dominant force in American politics. Nixon’s appeal to patriotism, his call to stand by the President, his claim of an American role as the guardian at the gates against totalitarianism have become a cornerstone of the resurgent conservatism of the last thirty years. Appropriately it was the principal voice of the conservative movement, Ronald Reagan, who, during his presidential campaign in 1980, christened Vietnam as a “noble cause.” Shortly after being inaugurated, Reagan said that “it is time to show our pride” for those who fought in Vietnam, “they came home without a victory not because they were defeated, but because they were denied a chance to win.” That “lesson” of Vietnam has become a centerpiece of conservative thought. After the successful Gulf War in 1991, President George H. W. Bush proclaimed that “we have kicked the Vietnam syndrome.” Military strategy especially in that war reflected the assumptions of the Powell Doctrine. This Doctrine grows out of the former Secretary of State’s bitterness over the way he saw the Vietnam War being waged during his two tours of duty there. The Powell Doctrine stresses some basic themes about war making: the need for clear goals; the backing of the American public; and the application of overwhelming force. Powell wrote that “war should be the politics of last resort. And when we go to war, we should have a purpose that our people understand and support; we should mobilize the country’s resources to fulfill that mission, and then go in to win.”

As Secretary of State, Powell shared, rather uneasily, policy making responsibilities with a group of President Bush's advisers—the so-called neo-conservatives—whose world views were also shaped by the Vietnam War. These views have been embraced by President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. During the 1980s and 1990s, neo-conservatism emerged among such figures as Paul Wolfowitz, who until recently was Under Secretary of Defense and has now become President of the World Bank; Richard Armitage, who was Under Secretary of State under Powell; Richard Perle, who is now on the Defense Policy Board; journalists like William Kristol and Norman Podhoretz and the scholar Jeanne Kirkpatrick, who served as Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations. This group has been instrumental in the development of the doctrine of pre-emptive war and were the major advocates of its implementation in the war to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Neo-conservatism's origins can be traced to the Vietnam era. Many of these men and women began their political careers as conservative Democrats who had supported the assertive internationalism of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. During the late 1960s, however, they turned away from the party as many liberal Democrats opposed the war in Vietnam and embraced the youth counterculture. The conservative Democrats refused to abandon the conviction that America needed to be assertive internationally and they traced failure in Vietnam to a failure of national will. They gravitated toward the Republican Party and gained considerable influence within its ranks. At the core of neo-conservative thought are three deeply held convictions: (a) America's moral superiority makes it an agent for democracy throughout the world; (b) any compromise with totalitarian regimes is a morally bankrupt policy; (c) that today the United States has the power to reorder the world. At the heart of disagreements between Powell and the neo-conservatives over the necessity for war against Iraq in 2003 was Powell's caution that reflected the assumptions of his Doctrine and the neo-conservative view of an omnipotent United States.

This conservative resurgence has been given an academic rationale by the rise of Vietnam War revisionism. Barely had the war ended before the retrospective battle over its meaning began. Seizing the initiative in the early postwar writer were revisionists, who argued that not only was the war justified, but that it also was eminently "winnable." They interjected into the debate "if-only" history: the argument that alternative courses of action would have yielded a successful outcome. Beginning with the early postwar memoirs and histories of a number of high-ranking military officers and continuing into the works of a number of scholars, the revisionists contend that America squandered its superior technology, manpower,

and resources. The titles of representative revisionist works -- *Strategy for Defeat*, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army*, *About Face*, *Lost Victory*, *A Better War* – convey their messages. Alternative strategies, revisionists argue, would have achieved “victory.”

The best known expression of revisionism comes from former military officers who write in the tradition of the Prussian officer Karl von Clausewitz, whose seminal work, *On War*, has profoundly influenced strategic thinking for nearly two hundred years. To these Clausewitzians – as they are sometimes labeled – American failure resulted from military and civilian leaders’ ignoring the classic doctrines of warfare, as set forth by Clausewitz. While there are several expressions of this argument, its best known source is the 1982 book, *On Strategy; A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, written by the Vietnam veteran, the late Colonel Harry Summers. To Summers and his fellow Clausewitzians, civilian leaders failed to recognize that Vietnam was a conventional war of aggression by North Vietnam and was not a Southern insurgency supported by the North. So United States’ power should have been used directly against North Vietnam, thus achieving a quick and decisive victory. Instead, American power was applied gradually and concentrated on the insurgency in South Vietnam, leading to a pointless war of attrition. The Clausewitzians argue that “if-only” the United States had engaged in all-out bombing of the North from the beginning (no gradual escalation of bombing), “if-only” the Americans had “sealed-off” North Vietnam from South Vietnam (thus preventing the flow of men and supplies to the South), “if-only” the US Navy had blockaded the ports of North Vietnam (thus halting the flow of supplies from the Soviet Union), and “if-only” the United States had left open the option of invading North Vietnam (Lyndon Johnson had promised the U.S. would not take that step), “if-only” American power had been used so fully and directly against North Vietnam, the insurgency in the South would have “withered on the vine,” and the government in Hanoi would have been so crippled that it would have accepted the U.S. objective of a divided Vietnam. Summers quotes Clausewitz: “A major victory can only be obtained by positive measures aimed at decision, never by simply waiting on events.” Instead of “waiting on events,” Summers concludes, the United States should have embraced the “positive aim” of “isolating” the source of the war – North Vietnam – from the Southern insurgency.

A revisionist view of Vietnam has been perpetuated by conservative politicians and commentators, as well as by the military leadership. Is it sound history? I think not. The Clausewitzian call for a more aggressive

war against North Vietnam ignores the reasons why President Johnson imposed restrictions on the bombing and why he promised not to invade North Vietnam: Johnson was determined to keep the war limited. He feared taking actions which would lead China or the Soviet Union to intervene militarily. He remembered how the American effort to unify Korea by sending troops into North Korea had led to China's intervention, an intervention which was followed by the longest retreat of an American army in history. Neither the Soviet Union nor China was prepared to see its ally defeated and both of the major communist powers indeed competed to see which could provide the greatest assistance to North Vietnam. Besides minimizing the international political realities, the Clausewitzians also minimize the internal politics of Vietnam, namely the chronic weakness and instability of South Vietnam. That weakness contributed to the strength of the communist insurgency, which was not wholly dependent on North Vietnam for its survival. Perhaps what is most lacking in revisionism is an appreciation of the strength of America's enemy. By all accounts, the North Vietnamese Army was an effective fighting force – disciplined, well-armed, mobile. The Viet Cong insurgency may have been substantially weakened during the war, but increased support from North Vietnam and the capacity to draw upon its historic strength among the peasantry contributed to its resiliency. The quality of the enemy's military had something to do with America's failure.

So the differences between revisionists and orthodox scholars remain clear-cut. Failure to the revisionists was in the execution of the war. Failure to the orthodox writers was in the decision to go to war. Revisionists write of a retrospective victory, while the orthodox school continue to see the war as unwinnable.

Vietnam, and these conflicting explanations of failure, continue to influence American culture. It is in part because the nation's leadership is now in the hands of men and women who came of age during the Vietnam era and whose views of America's place in the world have been shaped by their experiences and their reading on that war. Vietnam's continuing importance, however, runs deeper, because the era produced a counter-culture and a strong reaction to it, a phenomenon which has contributed to a decline in civility in political discourse. That was never clearer than in 1992 when the Democrats nominated Bill Clinton for President and Al Gore for Vice President, and they presented themselves as embodying the boomer generation coming of age. It led to an angry response at the Republican convention from another baby boomer, Marilyn Quayle, the wife of the Vice President. Speaking as one journalist wrote "through gritted teeth," Mrs. Quayle said:

Dan and I are members of the boomer generation too. Remember not everyone joined in the counterculture. Not everyone demonstrated, dropped out, took drugs, joined in the sexual revolution, or dodged the draft. Not everyone concluded that American society was so bad that it had to be radically remade by social revolution. . . . The majority of my generation lived by the credo our parents taught us: we believed in God, in hard work and personal discipline, in our nation's essential goodness, and in the opportunity it promised those willing to work for it. . . . Though we knew some changes need to be made, we did not believe in destroying America to save it."

In commenting on last Fall's first debate between the presidential candidates, the journalist Lawrence Kudlow – echoing Nixon, Agnew, Quayle and others-- said that Senator Kerry could not win a debate on foreign policy because he was too reflective and doubting, too concerned with international opinion, too cognizant of the limits of American power to match President Bush's bold and confident vision for winning the global war on terror. That contrast has everything to do with the way that the candidates and their parties reflect two differing interpretations of the Vietnam War's "lessons."

The journalist David Broder recently asked rhetorically: "Will we ever recover from the 1960s?" I close with Broder's conclusion which offers little hope in the short run: "The reality is that on both sides of the 1960s culture war, the wounds are so deep they apparently cannot be forgotten or forgiven. The only thing that will save the country – and end this breach in its leadership – is that the boomers are now in their 60s. Another generation will eventually come to power and the country will finally be spared from constantly re-fighting these same battles."

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