

The Consequences of Defeat in Vietnam

by Mark Atwood Lawrence

As historians of the Vietnam War know all too well, the amount of documentation about the conflict available in US archives—to say nothing of foreign repositories—can be overwhelming. To master even a small slice of this material is a herculean undertaking, and the task grows more daunting year by year as the US government declassifies more material. In the face of this documentary avalanche, one can't help but be impressed by the sheer thoroughness, if not always the courage and wisdom, with which US decision-makers, diplomats, and military commanders analyzed, debated, and recorded virtually every dimension of the war.



President Lyndon B. Johnson in Vietnam, 1966. (National Archives and Records Administration)

Yet the archival record of the war years is conspicuously thin in one area: detailed assessments of the consequences the United States would suffer if it failed to achieve its goals in Vietnam. Would defeat inevitably amount to a dangerous setback in the broader Cold War? Would it invite further communist aggression, or might the United States be able to contain the damage? Such questions went mostly unexamined during the peak years of American embroilment. To be sure, US leaders intensely analyzed these issues in the years leading up to the major escalation of American involvement in 1965. Again and again, they came to the same conclusion: communist takeover of South Vietnam would open the way to communist expansion elsewhere in Asia and cause US allies and adversaries alike to question the credibility of US commitments around the world, thus inviting further aggression and endangering US alliances. On the strength of these conclusions, Lyndon Johnson committed the United States to a major war in the first months of 1965 despite abundant warnings that victory would be exceedingly difficult to achieve. Thereafter, however, US officials went mostly silent on the issue, content to rest on the assumptions embraced at the outset.

It's not difficult to identify reasons why this was so. Once American troops began fighting and dying, US officials had little encouragement or incentive to study whether the effort was in fact worthwhile. The key question became how, not whether, to fight the war. Any official who dwelled on the possibility of failure risked being labeled defeatist—hardly an appealing prospect in any presidential administration but especially disagreeable for officials serving under Johnson, a president who surrounded himself with yes-men and quickly banished dissenters from his inner circle. Nor did US officials come under much pressure from anti-war critics to reckon in detail with the question of what would happen if the United States failed to achieve its objectives. Radical critics of the war, it's true, sometimes speculated that defeat might humble the United States and produce thoroughgoing reform of US foreign policies, but that was hardly the kind of commentary that was likely to generate serious study in the corridors of power.

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Only once between the Americanization of the war in 1965 and the end of the Johnson presidency in January 1969 did the US bureaucracy weigh in detail the possible consequences of defeat. On

September 12, 1967, CIA Director Richard Helms sent the President a thirty-three-page report entitled “Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam”—a fascinating document that was declassified in 1993 but has curiously escaped close attention from scholars. The report, a provocative resource for teaching purposes, is available on-line at http://www.foia.cia.gov/docs/DOC_0001166443/DOC_0001166443.pdf.

In a covering note to LBJ, Helms displayed remarkable unease about what his agency had produced. The report, Helms insisted, was by no means intended as an argument for ending the war. Nor, he hastened to add, was it written to convey any sort of despair about America’s prospects. “We are not defeatist out here,” Helms asserted from his office in Langley, Virginia. Going still further to reassure the President, he noted that the paper would be delivered to the White House in a sealed envelope and that no other government official would see it.

Such copious reassurances no doubt reflected Helms’s keen awareness that he was lobbing a bombshell of sorts at the Oval Office. In cautious but clear language, the report challenged some of the core assumptions on which Johnson had taken the country to war and had repeatedly escalated the US commitment during 1966 and 1967. Above all, the study, which distilled the opinions of more than thirty CIA officials, argued that failure in Vietnam would not permanently damage the US position in the world by opening the way to a devastating chain of communist takeovers or destroying American credibility. Rather, it concluded, “such risks are probably more limited and controllable than most previous argument has indicated.”

The study noted that an “unfavorable outcome” would almost certainly not come about through spectacular military defeat or the sudden political collapse of the South Vietnamese government. The United States was too powerful and had invested too much in Vietnam to permit that kind of catastrophe. The report instead foresaw that the United States would offer concessions during prolonged negotiations leading to a political settlement. Though such a deal might at first look like a compromise, the study asserted, it would “in the end lead to the establishment of Communist power in South Vietnam,” perhaps within as little as one year after the end of the fighting.

Even a relatively peaceful and orderly communist takeover would undoubtedly have serious repercussions, the CIA paper acknowledged. This scenario, it argued, would amount to “a rather dramatic demonstration that there are certain limits on US power, a discovery that would be unexpected for many, disconcerting for some, and encouraging to others.” Above all, communist takeover would make strikingly clear that the United States, “acting within the constraints imposed by its traditions and public attitudes, cannot crush a revolutionary movement which is sufficiently large, dedicated, competent, and well-supported.”

But none of this, the study added, would necessarily amount to a cataclysmic blow to US power. The CIA took heart from several considerations. First, a setback in Vietnam would do nothing to weaken the “essential strength” of the United States, which would unquestionably remain the “weightiest single factor” in global politics. “Historically,” the report pointed out, “great powers have repeatedly absorbed setbacks without permanent diminution of the role which they subsequently played” in global affairs. At the same time, there was no reason to believe that every government around the world would view a US defeat in Vietnam as a grievous blow to American power and credibility. On the contrary, the study observed, some nations would be reassured by indications that the United States was using its power with “greater responsibility” and a “better-balanced concern for other parts of the world than Southeast Asia.” Even those governments that questioned American credibility could be significantly reassured by fresh indications of American resolve.

The largest chunk of the report sought to demonstrate, region by region, that the consequences of defeat would be less serious than commonly supposed. In Southeast Asia, the focus of American anxiety about falling dominoes and Chinese expansion, the CIA predicted communist takeovers in Laos and Cambodia. In Malaya, Burma, the Philippines, and Indonesia, however, the report saw good reason to believe that anti-communist political forces were firmly in control and, with fresh US reassurances, would stay that way. As for Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, the report offered similar judgment: with proper indications of continued US support, all of them would remain firmly within the American geopolitical orbit. Nor did the report see reason for alarm about the possibility that West European allies would interpret an American defeat in Vietnam as an indication of weakening US commitment to NATO. "Most would understand that the American stake in Europe's security is of a far different order of importance, and would not be disposed to make false analogies," the study concluded.

Finally, it challenged the notion that the Soviet Union or revolutionary Third World states would be greatly emboldened by a communist takeover in Vietnam to mount new insurgencies. The Soviets were likely to act only with "their usual caution" and would draw back in the face of new demonstrations of US resolve, the CIA predicted. Meanwhile, it added, new commitments of economic and military aid to friendly Third World nations would likely counteract any new temptations to mount guerrilla wars against governments aligned with Washington.

Was the CIA report correct its predictions? What would have happened if LBJ had accepted the logic of the report and sought to disengage the United States from Vietnam in 1967? Might the United States have safely wound down the war in 1967 or 1968, thereby saving more than 25,000 American lives and sparing Vietnam unimaginable destruction? These questions, posed after laying out the basic history of the war, would surely stir lively discussion in any classroom. There are, of course, no definitive answers. But like most good counterfactual problems, the questions can help clarify core issues. Exactly what did American leaders believe they were fighting for in Vietnam? Why did LBJ and other American leaders continue the war even as evidence suggested a lack of progress? Why did they never really reexamine the assumptions that had led them to war in 1965? To put the matter bluntly, why did the Vietnam War last so long?

Alas, LBJ left no clear indications of his thoughts about the CIA document or many of the issues that it raised. But little imagination is necessary to pinpoint reasons why he might have tossed it aside after a merely cursory reading. He may have believed that the document was simply irrelevant since the United States, despite the challenges it faced, could still achieve its basic objectives in Vietnam. Certainly, many scholars believe LBJ never wavered in his belief that the United States could prevail militarily and politically in Vietnam, even after the US public reaction to the 1968 Tet Offensive forced him to open negotiations with North Vietnam. Or he may have believed that the document was simply wrong—that it underestimated the likelihood of bold communist expansion or devastating damage to America's credibility. Certainly, Nixon's foreign policy point man, Henry Kissinger, took that view when he came into office in 1969. It's also possible that domestic political calculations, including LBJ's sense of his prospects for reelection in 1968, led the President to believe he had to carry on the war and thereby escape damaging criticism for weakness in the face of communist aggression.

What is striking from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, however, is the accuracy of the CIA's analysis and therefore, quite arguably, the tragic nature of the decisions by Johnson and then Nixon to prolong the war for another five years. The CIA's description of how the war might end—US concessions leading to a negotiated agreement, followed by communist takeover within a relatively brief period—proved remarkably prescient. The United States opened talks in 1968 and, following numerous major concessions to the communists, reached a settlement in Hanoi in early 1973, only to see communist

forces overrun South Vietnam in the spring of 1975. More importantly, the consequences of this setback played out almost exactly as the CIA report anticipated. Laos and Cambodia quickly fell to communist insurgencies, but otherwise American allies in Asia remained strong and loyal. In Europe, meanwhile, NATO survived. Throughout the Third World, the communist victory in Vietnam energized a few radical regimes and spurred a few insurgencies. Over the long run, though, those developments amounted to little, and new infusions of American military aid reversed the course of the Cold War in the Third World in the United States' favor by the mid-1980s.

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