

# THE REAL LESSONS OF VIETNAM

**Libertarian  
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Looking back on the events leading up to the final collapse of South Vietnam in 1975 an increasing number of commentators are coming to conclude that the period 1973-75 saw a radical shift in US foreign policy, a sharp change for the worse.<sup>1</sup> The factor behind this was an alarming loss of self-confidence resulting in the lack of will to counter the many challenges invited by the Vietnam debacle. The era of detente saw this impotence elevated almost to the status of political doctrine. It was what Sir Robert Thompson, the British counter-insurgency expert, termed 'strategic surrender'; typified by an American passivity in the face of Communist expansion which would have been extraordinary before 1973.

The fall of South Vietnam ushered in this new American foreign policy, largely lacking in the self-respect vital to any nation with world-wide responsibilities and interests. Vietnam had come to assume a symbolic significance far greater than the facts justify, for Vietnam was in reality far less of a disaster than the mythology suggests.

## MILITARY VICTORY

Analysis of the Vietnam war might be helped by viewing it as essentially two wars, or perhaps two distinct phases of one war. The first from the early 1960s to 1973, the second from 1974 to 1975. The first war involved the Vietcong and North Vietnam against the South and the USA (with some allied troops). The result was a military victory for the USA and South Vietnam. Sir Robert Thompson wrote:

"In my view, on December 30th, 1972 ... you (the Americans) had won the war. It was over! ... They (the North Vietnamese) and their whole rear base at that point were at your mercy. They would have taken any terms."<sup>2</sup>

This advantage was jeopardized by the "hasty Vietnam capitulation"<sup>3</sup> and finally thrown away when the US Congress refused to help the South in the second war.

This was a simple North versus South conflict (the Vietcong having been wiped out as a fighting force). The North re-equipped with massive Soviet aid and attacked a South Vietnam deprived of essential military equipment by an irresponsible US Congress. South Vietnam fell to a conventional invasion by regular army units.

To put it bluntly the US betrayed the South at the very moment when it was easiest to help. It was pointed out at the time that the huge concentrations of North Vietnamese troops and armour made a perfect target for American bombers. The offensive could have been stopped in its tracks. What really mattered though, was the behaviour of Congress. It cut the South's effective firepower by 60%;<sup>4</sup> and the effects on morale must have been devastating.

Instead of strengthening American determination never to let such blatant Communist aggression succeed again the opposite process occurred. The myth of US military defeat weakened American resolve. The real lessons had not been learnt.

The 1980s have seen a start of the renewal of US resolve. While the myths surrounding Vietnam remain generally unchallenged, America has put them behind her, the ghost has been exorcised. The change has its origins, suggests General Walker, in the Iran Hostage Crisis and perhaps more importantly in the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> The events in Afghanistan caused President Carter to change his opinion "more drastically in one week than in the previous two and a half years about the Kremlin's ultimate goals". Clearer evidence that American resolve was returning was given by the election of Mr Reagan to the Presidency. He has shown the world, and the USSR in particular, that the USA has once again decided to adopt a serious foreign policy, one that will as a consequence gain America the prestige she deserves as foremost defender of the non-Communist world.

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## THE GRENADAN INTERVENTION

Would, for instance, the Caribbean states have looked to the USA under Mr Carter for decisive measures after the Grenadan coup? In the unlikely event of such an appeal, would there have been an adequate response? Probably not. Yet President Reagan was prepared to take firm action, action which must have come as a great relief to many other small nations.

The response of the British Government must be commented on. Mrs Thatcher's attitude shocked many of her supporters. For all her anti-Communist talk Mrs Thatcher has done precious little to aid the USA. Now even her moral support seems doubtful. The Americans have every right to feel aggrieved; they are justified in expecting rather more.

Much has been written on the wrongs and rights of the Grenada affair, a great deal of it trivial or irrelevant. The ill-defined and often misused term 'National Sovereignty' illustrates this well. The complaints would seem to be centred on whether the USA was entitled to land troops in Grenada and depose the Marxist dictatorship that had just seized power. This, say the critics, constitutes interference in the other nation's affairs.

Apart from the fact that as Governor-General Sir Paul Scoon was legally entitled to ask for intervention on behalf of Grenada, the Americans were not the first to intervene and, as J. S. Mill explained:

"The doctrine of non-intervention, to be a legitimate principle of morality, must be accepted by all governments. The despots must consent to be bound by it as well as the free states. Unless they do, the profession of it by free countries comes but to this miserable issue, that the wrong side may help the wrong, but the right must not help the right. Intervention to enforce non-intervention is always rightful, always moral, if not always prudent."<sup>6</sup>

If a Soviet engineered coup, bringing to power a highly unpopular, puppet, hardline Marxist clique is not intervention in the affairs of another state then the word 'intervention' loses its meaning.

Furthermore, National Sovereignty should surely be considered less important than 'the Will of the People' and 'the Will of the People' of Grenada clearly favoured the US liberation of their island.

President Reagan said that Grenada could not be compared to Afghanistan. He was wrong. The comparison is perfectly valid. In each case a fairly bloody coup set up by the USSR ousted an existing Marxist administration which was proving not quite as compliant as the Soviets had hoped. In Afghanistan the Americans lacked the resolve or, more importantly, the ability, to effectively help the populace (except through covert aid to the Afghan resistance). In Grenada they lacked neither. The USA was willing and able to act and did so quickly and effectively.

## ESCALATION

There is a school of thought which holds that the West as a whole should adopt a policy known by a variety of names but which will here be called 'Horizontal Escalation Theory'. Its origins could be said to lie in Henry Kissinger's work *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*. Horizontal Escalation has been defined as follows:

"The United States must be ready to meet Soviet aggression wherever it occurs, but it must also be able to take counter-offensive action at points of its own choosing, not necessarily on the aggressor's immediate front but at his most vulnerable points."<sup>7</sup>

While it does advocate military action in cases where such a course may be considered viable, Horizontal Escalation Theory must not be viewed in solely military terms. A political dimension is equally, and in many cases more, important; for it is not enough to defeat Communism on the battlefield without demonstrating how what the West has to offer is superior to the hollow promises of Communism. In theory this should not be hard but the West has on many occasions shown itself rather inept at this aspect of the struggle against World Communism. The eventual recognition of the importance of the political dimension in the Vietnamese war was a major factor behind the US and South Vietnamese victories in 1972.

Crucial to Horizontal Escalation Theory is a strong nuclear force to deter the USSR from turning a limited conventional war into an all-out nuclear one. Thus the loss of colonies is not in itself sufficient to persuade the Soviets to launch a war which would destroy all chances of World Communism; there would be no world left for there to be Communism in.

## GREATER EFFORTS

So far the discussion has mainly centred on the Americans. Consideration should also be given to the vital role Europe should play (and has so far largely avoided) in a strategy for combatting the worldwide imperialistic adventures of the USSR. The European partners in NATO should endeavour to contribute more to their own defence, thus allowing the release of US troops and materials for use elsewhere. They should be encouraged to support those of their friendly ex-colonies threatened by internal subversion or external attack. Above all the West ought to co-ordinate its efforts; greater military and political cooperation must be achieved.

To end I would like to briefly address those genuine opponents of Communism that find the Horizontal Escalation Theory too extreme. Not long ago I saw the following on a Church noticeboard: "Nothing is stronger than the unarmed Truth", or words to that effect. My contention is that the armed and determined Truth is a great deal stronger. A judicious use of a combination of force, political warfare and diplomacy will get results sooner than waiting passively for the internal contradictions of Communist societies to result in their collapse and will almost certainly save a great deal of human suffering in the long run.

## NOTES:

1. See W. Scott Thompson and D.D. Frizzell (eds.), *The Lessons of Vietnam*, Macdonald and James, London, 1977.
2. *The Lessons of Vietnam*, *ibid*.
3. *Alexander Solzhenitsyn Speaks to the West*, 1978, Bodley Head, 1978.
4. Richard Nixon, *The Real War*, by Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1980.
5. General Sir Walter Walker, *The Next Domino*, Covenant Books, London, 1980.
6. J. S. Mill, *A Few Words on Non-Intervention*, Foreign Policy Perspectives No. 8, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1988, p. 6.
7. S. Lunn, *Burden Sharing in NATO*, Chatham House Papers No. 98, London, 1978. Lunn does not support Horizontal Escalation Theory but his definition is the best I have come across.