National Security Strategy: The Vietnam War, 1954-1975

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Overview We look briefly at the longest war America ever fought, the Vietnam War. We trace the gradual escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and study how three successive administrations tried to implement flexible response there. We also examine some of the reasons for the ultimate defeat of the United States at the hands of the North Vietnamese.

By all accounts, Vietnam was the ideal test-case for Flexible Response because it provided the exact type of crisis that the new strategy was supposedly designed to resolve better than Massive Retaliation ever could. The administration was supremely confident in its ability to carefully calibrate its behavior to match the problem. In the end, it all went to pieces: South Vietnam was not saved, the credibility of the U.S. declined considerably, encouraging future aggressions (that materialized within several years of the war's end), and it seriously unhinged the domestic consensus that allowed the country to present a determined front to the Soviet challenge.

There were several problem with the strategy, almost all of them in the assumptions quietly embedded in it. First, the domino theory proved an elusive pill that became increasingly hard to swallow as the costs of propping that particular piece steadily soared. Second, calibrating the use of force in the fog of war was a mysterious and impossible task. Third, pulverizing a backward peasant society did nothing to enhance the image of the U.S. as the beacon of freedom, peace, and hope for mankind. Finally, communism not only failed to spread, but Vietnam soon found itself at war with both Cambodia and China.

The American involvement in Vietnam began long before the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. When the French returned to Indochina after the end of the War in the Pacific, they made a fatal mistake in ignoring the forces of nationalism unleashed by the world war. The Japanese, although eventually beaten, had shown that the Europeans could be defeated. The pent up tensions in the Asian colonies quickly erupted and when the French decided to reassert themselves by military means, fierce struggles for independence began. The army of the nationalist communist leader Ho Chi Minh, which could not match the French at the beginning, was quite successful in employing guerrilla tactics to bleed the French dry.

Following maps are included:

- Figure 1: Indochina
- Figure 2: the situation on the eve of overt U.S. involvement in 1964
- Figure 3: the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive in 1968
- Figure 4: the conquest of South Vietnam by the North, 1975

Figure 1: Indochina, 1954.

1 Chronology of Events

3/20/54	French request US intervention at Dien Bien Phu; refused
4/26/54	Geneva conference opens, Ho stalls hoping for military victory
5/7/54	French surrender; government in Paris falls
7/20-21/54	Geneva Accords end conflict in Vietnam
1955	French almost completely gone, US assumes their role
1958	Ngo Dinh Diem's regime detested for repression, corruption
1960	Hanoi establishes National Liberation Front (Viet Cong)
5/61	LBJ on fact-finding mission to Vietnam, encourages full commitment
mid-1962	JFK sends 10,000 "advisers," US air strikes, secret bombings in Laos
5/8/63	Diem troops fire at Buddhists celebrating at a festival
11/1-2/63	Diem overthrown in military coup with US knowledge and approval
11/22/63	JFK assassinated in Dallas, LBJ becomes President
1964	seven governments come to power and fall in Saigon
8/2/64	*Maddox* attacked by North Vietnamese in the Gulf of Tonkin
2/8/65	American bombing raids on NV begin (Rolling Thunder)
9/67	Nguyen Van Thieu elected president of South Vietnam
2/68	Tet Offensive by NVA/VC demonstrates war is far from over
3/31/68	LBJ announces withdrawal from presidential race
2/69	RN bombs VC bases in Cambodia; begins "Vietnamization"
9/3/69	Ho Chi Minh dies
4/30/70	US invades Cambodia to destroy VC bases and supply routes
1/2/71	Congress repeals Gulf of Tonkin Resolution; RN bombs Laos
8/71	wage-price controls in US; dollar goes off gold standard
6/72	US ceases ground combat in Vietnam
10/26/72	Kissinger announces that "peace is at hand;" RN wins in landslide
12/72	Thieu denounces the agreement publicly
12/18/72	RN launches 12-day "Christmas Bombing" against NV
1/27/73	Paris Peace Agreement among US, NV, VC, and SV ends war for US
1/1/75	NVA invades South Vietnam, quickly capturing major cities
4/30/75	SV surrenders to North Vietnam, the country is unified
7/2/76	The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is created

Casualties: US: 58,202 dead, 304,704 WIA; ARVN (South Vietnam): 223,748 dead, 1,169,763 WIA; NVA/VC: 1,100,000 dead, 600,000 WIA. Civilians: 4 million (2 for each side of Vietnam).

2 The French in Indochina

The French, whose economy ruined by the War in Europe could hardly afford the costly fighting, turned to the Americans for help. Eisenhower responded and by

1954, the US was paying over 70% of the French military budget. It was the domino theory in action again: propping the French colonial rule, however repugnant, was seen as the only way to avoid "losing" Vietnam to communism. Like in Korea, the Americans made no distinction between nationalism and communism; one of the most persistent and worst mistakes of Cold War foreign policy. Ho was a communist but as all communists he was nationalist first. In fact, soon after Vietnam won its independence, it found itself at war with China, another one of the "fraternal" conflicts the communists were not above fighting.

In 1954, the French, battered by Ho's guerrilla tactics and all but paralyzed by domestic instability at home, decided to make a major stand at Dien Bien Phu, a town at the bottom of a valley close to the borders with Laos and China. Although the Viet Minh (the communist guerrillas) commanded the mountaintop, the French thought they would not be able to bring the necessary artillery to defeat the garrison.

They were wrong—the Viet Minh somehow managed to assemble an impressive artillery array and soon began a murderous shelling of the garrison. On March 20, the French requested U.S. intervention, including the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Some in the administration supported the nukes idea but Eisenhower vetoed it. Congress refused to approve intervention after finding out the JCs were split (Army didn't want massive intervention) and the European allies had not been consulted. In April Dulles flew to London to ask the British for support but Churchill refused to help the French on the eve of a conference in Geneva, set for April 26, 1954, where the interested powers were to meet to settle the problem of Indochina.

The Geneva conference opened on April 26 but Ho stalled, hoping for a decisive victory. Without U.S. intervention, the French position at Dien Bien Phu became untenable and on May 7, the decimated French garrison surrendered. The French now began stalling, hoping for some improvement, but in mid-June the government fell in Paris and the Gaullist right-wing coalition came to power promising peace in Indochina by July 20.

In the two pacts of July 20-21, 1954, the Geneva Accords, the two sides agreed (1) to a truce between Ho and the French (not any South Vietnamese government); (2) on a temporary division along the 17th parallel, with the French evacuating the North of this line; (3) neither North Vietnam nor South Vietnam would join military alliances or allow foreign bases on their territories; and (4) elections would be held within two years to unify the county—France would remain in the South to supervise them there.

The situation eerily resembled that in Korea: USSR and China pressured Ho into accepting the deal although at the time his armies controlled two-thirds of the country. Ho agreed and withdrew his foreign troops north of the 17th parallel but he never forgave his fellow communists for deserting him and ignored their advice in the 1960s when they counseled talks with the US. Both China and the USSR wanted no excuse for the U.S. to intervene and they sold out Ho by (again!) completely ignoring, just like in Korea, the simple fact that the Vietnamese wanted

unification and were prepared to endure great hardships to get it. Ho also thought the French would conduct the elections in 1956 and that Ho would certainly win—he was the most popular and powerful nationalist leader in Vietnam. However, Ho had neglected one possibility: that the US might replace the French colonials in the South.

The US had not been party to the negotiations, refused to accept the accord which gave the control of half of Vietnam, and by the end of 1954, the US began replacing the French in South Vietnam. It announced that (1) it would support only free elections supervised by the U.N., and (2) the help would go directly to South Vietnam's government instead of being channeled through the French. Military advisers began training the South Vietnamese army to resist without the help of US troops: one "lesson" from Korea—another was to train them to fight a conventional war… both were wrong.

3 Initial American Involvement

By July 1955, the French had almost completely left. The US placed South Vietnamese government in the hands of Ngo Dinh Diem, whom they brought from self-imposed exile in New York. Diem announced there would be no elections arguing the Geneva Accords were with the French, not his government. However, by 1958 the Diem regime had become wildly unpopular—it had stopped the agrarian reforms initiated by Ho, had become authoritarian, with all power concentrated in the hands of Diem, his brothers, and his brother's wife, and very repressive. The result, of course, was stepped-up anti-Diem guerrilla activity.

In 1960, Ho's government in Hanoi acknowledged and encouraged the struggle of South Vietnamese pro-communists by establishing the National Liberation Front (NLF). The US-trained South Vietnamese army couldn't handle the Vietminh guerrillas whose numbers swelled to 10,000 in early 1961. Moreover, it didn't like Diem and even tried an unsuccessful coup against him in November 1960.

Worried about the growing civil unrest in South Vietnam, JFK sent Vice President Johnson on a fact-finding mission in May 1961. With very dubious accuracy, Johnson called Diem the "Winston Churchill of Asia," and urged open and full support to stop the communist expansion. Even JFK, who had his doubts about the domino theory and who thought that once China acquired nuclear capability, it would become the dominant power in the region regardless of what the US did in Vietnam, soon found himself accepting the Eisenhower-Dulles policies that treated the nationalist Vietminh as part of the global communist threat.

By mid 1962, Kennedy expanded US commitment to 10,000 "advisers" whom he allowed to engage in combat. He ordered US air force strikes against Vietminh strongholds in South Vietnam, and promised full support to Diem. The South Vietnamese dictator interpreted this as a blank check and intensified his repressions.

One program uprooted thousands of villagers and placed them in fortified hamlets that to the peasants looked a lot like concentration camps.

In addition, at the time of the US escalation in South Vietnam, a key area in Laos fell to the communist Laotian forces, who had resumed fighting in Laos after the CIA violated the Geneva Accords and began supplying various guerrilla groups with weapons. In 1962, Kennedy authorized a series of bombing raids on Laos which Washington carefully tried to keep secret.

By 1963, the US policies had hardened: (1) Vietnam had become vital to US interests, as part of the domino theory; (2) USSR was believed to have been disciplined by the Cuban crisis; (3) China was believed to have been taught a lesson. At the end of 1962 the Chinese attacked and destroyed Indian forces in a disputed border region. They occupied an area they wanted and withdrew from the rest. However, the withdrawal coincided with the arrival of a US aircraft carrier which was responding on JFK's orders to India's urgent pleas for help. The US (wrongly) concluded, like it had done in Iran in 1946 with respect to the Soviets, that China had backed down because of the US threat. These conclusions dragged the US further into the Vietnamese conflict.

In 1962 Secretary of Defense McNamara observed that "every quantitative measurement we have shows we're winning the war." Yet the Vietminh steadily gained ground, supported by the peasants who disliked Diem's measures intensely. On January 2, 1962, only 50 miles from Saigon, a small band of Vietminh was surrounded by a South Vietnamese unit ten times its size. Despite the urgings of US advisers to attack, the South Vietnamese refused. The Vietminh shot down 5 American helicopters, damaged 9 more, killed 3 Americans, and disappeared. Apparently, the US soldiers were the only ones willing to fight in Vietnam. Kennedy still insisted these were not combat troops and if the situation required some, he would "of course, go to Congress." He also tried to "disappear" US news correspondents who faithfully reported on the brutal doings of the Diem regime.

However, these became too obvious when on May 8, 1963, Diem's troops shot into a crowd of Buddhists who were celebrating by waving religious flags (which violated the regime's rule that forbade the display of any flag except the government's). This was stupid: 80% of the country's population was Buddhist and didn't want to participate in the war. By June, radicalized nationalist Buddhist-led riots spread through Saigon. The Catholic Diem regime raided pagodas, causing students to join the Buddhists. By late summer of 1963, Diem confronted a full-scale rebelion.

The US decided Diem had outlived his usefulness. On November 1 and 2, with the knowledge and approval of the White House, a military junta captured and executed Diem and his brother. Three weeks after the junta assumed power, Kennedy himself was assassinated in Dallas.

Johnson's view of the world (the US would clear the way for free enterprise by removing the communist obstacles) merged with the fallen president's fiery rhetoric

to produce the worst military disaster for the US. By wielding uncompromising power, which Johnson declared was bestowed on it by providence and the forces of history, the US had a responsibility to the world. The President's end justifies the means logic was displayed in 1965 when he stated that "we are not a people so much concerned with the way things are done as by the results that we achieve." He declared: "America wins the wars that she undertakes. Make no mistake about it," and then proceeded to lead the United States into defeat.

Saigon politics were in chaos—in 1964, seven governments came to power and fell. The civil war also intensified. South Vietnamese troops didn't want to fight the Vietcong, whose supplies mostly came from captured or purchased equipment from South Vietnam. In 1964, Hanoi offered to negotiate but was rebuffed by the US, which sought a clear military advantage in order to negotiate from the position of strength.

4 U.S. Enters Openly

On August 2, 1964, the war entered the phase of overt US involvement. American warships in the Gulf of Tonkin had been clandestinely assisting South Vietnamese troops in attacks against North Vietnamese shore areas, which had precipitated the torpedo boats attack against the US destroyer *Maddox*. Johnson labeled the attacks an "open aggression on the open seas," branded it as unprovoked, and (without consulting SEATO or NATO allies or Congress), LBJ ordered a US air attack on North Vietnamese ports.[1]

He then requested Congressional approval for retaliation curiously and conveniently neglecting to mention the real cause of North Vietnam's attacks. Uninformed, Congress made one of the worst foreign policy errors when it passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution giving the President advance consent that he could "prevent further aggression" and "take all necessary steps" to protect any SEATO nation that might request aid "in defense of its freedom."

In August 1964 the resolution sailed through the House and then the Senate—all potential opposition was silenced by loud choruses demanding speedy response, national unity, and proclaiming trust in the President's good discretion in the use of these essentially unlimited powers. During the next 4 years LBJ waged war without an explicit declaration of war by Congress. The Imperial Presidency had reached its peak. In 1971, the fed-up Congress finally repealed the resolution, but not before the damage had been done.

On February 8, 1965, American bombing raids on North Vietnam began. In March LBJ began "Rolling Thunder," a systematic, long-term bombing campaign

[1]The attacks on the 2nd did occur and we have evidence of that. More reports came about attacks on the 4th, but as it later turned out, these were wrong and no additional attacks had happened. Johnson made his decision erroneously believing that the boat had been attacked on the 4th.

against the North. From April to August, about 100,000 US troops went to Vietnam—the logic of escalation was merciless: every increase in US strength designed to weaken the resolve of Hanoi only stiffened it and was matched by North Vietnam with aid from Russia and China. The bombing aimed at cutting the supply lines of the Vietcong but these were so primitive that they were easily reestablished—most of the supplies only required several hundred men or so (on foot) to keep the Vietcong refueled on a daily basis. Bombings killed two civilians for every Vietminh and ground seek-and-destroy operations killed six civilians for every guerilla.

The war intensified and in 1966 there were more American than South Vietnamese troops killed in action! Although a new strongman, Air Vice Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky, came to power, desertions continued on a mass scale, fueled by inflation, corruption, and the growing American involvement.

The US aimed for military victory—it was impossible to imagine letting one Asian nation slip into communism because of the "other reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China." For their part, the North Vietnamese wouldn't settle for anything but a complete US withdrawal—they were not going to be betrayed again like they were in 1954 at Geneva. Although China had announced support for wars of national liberation, they had not promised aid and clearly expected others to help themselves, just like the Chinese had done. Moreover, in 1966 a series of armed clashes occurred between them and the Russians along their common border. With Moscow replacing Beijing as Hanoi's primary source of aid, the Chinese were being squeezed from two directions. At this point LBJ sent 400,000 American troops to save Vietnam from China.

The Russians were the only ones who benefited from the intervention: (i) they won favor with the Vietnamese (Soviet operated missile sites show down US planes); (ii) countered Chinese influences in Asia; (iii) made a recovery in foreign relations by 1971 because of US attention focused in Vietnam; (iv) NATO split: in 1966 de Gaulle pulled France out and, irony of all ironies, condemned the US "foreign intervention" in Vietnam—this would not be the last time Europeans would criticize the US for being in a mess that they had largely created; (v) only 4 nations (of 40 linked to US by treaty) sent troops: Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Thailand, the latter two only after the US paid handsomely for their troops; (vi) just as American involvement escalated in Vietnam, LBJ deescalated conflict with the Soviets. It is thus not surprising that the Soviets consistently refused to mediate an end to the war in Vietnam.

Still, the Americans hoped the USSR might pressure Ho to make peace (it was North Vietnam's largest military supplies). LBJ initiated the policy of détente (lessening of international tension) but to no avail—the Soviets made good use of it. At home, inflation doubled to 5% and anti-war protests intensified. LBJ's excellent Great Society Program began collapsing because of the war effort.

In February 1968, North Vietnam launched a surprise Tet (New Year) offensive and wasn't beaten back until threatening the US embassy in Saigon. Despite the

heavy casualties and being a military failure, the offensive was a success politically because it exposed as a lie the frequent promises of the US government that war was at an end. LBJ despaired and on March 31, 1968, he pulled out of the presidential race to concentrate on making peace with Ho.

And peace was urgently needed: the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy in 1968, and the anti-war riots of the summer created chaos at home. In Europe the Soviets were on the move, crushing, like they had done in Hungary in 1956, a budding reform program, this time in Czechoslovakia. The peace talks, however, collapsed when the South Vietnamese government refused to approve the deal.

As it turned out, the talks had been sabotaged by private citizen and candidate for president Nixon, to whom one of the important negotiators, a guy of incredible arrogance and with penchant for illegal secret activities in the wonderfully elastic name of national security—Henry Kissinger—had provided information. Nixon, who feared that a successful peace bargain would cost him the White House, promised South Vietnam that if they refused LBJ's deal he (Nixon) would get them a better one when he becomes president.

This reprehensible act delayed peace by 5 years and cost over 20,000 American lives—the final terms were basically the ones LBJ had offered. Nixon literally stumbled into the White House and picked Kissinger for his national security advisor. Kissinger quoted Goethe: "If I had to choose between justice and disorder, on the one hand, and injustice and order on the other, I would always choose the latter." Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon were probably the gravest peril the American democracy faced for it came from within.

5 Johnson and Rolling Thunder

Johnson's administration initially resorted to a strategy of gradual escalation (recall the limited war ideas of Schelling). First, the U.S. would target military and economic installations, holding population centers, irrigation dikes, and major industrial installations hostage to future attacks. The idea was to gradually turn up the screw in a recognizable pattern such that Hanoi would realize the increasing risk to its civilians, and also to its nascent industrial base that was crucial to the government's ability to create and run a country. The bombing started with military installations, and then progressed steadily to the north until the summer of 1965. All of this was accompanied by diplomatic signals that if Hanoi would stop its support for the Viet Cong, the U.S. would halt the bombing; if not, even greater devastation would be inflicted.

As this strategy did not pay off, the U.S. shifted to an attempt to disrupt North Vietnam's ability (rather than willingness) to support the insurgency. An overwhelming majority of the sorties were reconnaissance missions, and the rest con-

centrated on destroying petroleum facilities that were deemed vital to the North's ability to send materials to the South. By the spring of 1967, however, all the designated targets had been destroyed without making any noticeable diplomatic headway with Hanoi or having an appreciable military impact on the Viet Cong. Johnson removed the few remaining obstacles, and the U.S. struck at vital industrial centers in the North. By early 1968, all identifiable targets had been obliterated. As John Mueller notes in his book, "the only remaining possibilities for increased military action against the North were mining and bombing of ports, bombing dikes and locks, and a land invasion of North Vietnam." In 1968, the U.S. gradually scaled down its bombing of the North. Rolling Thunder was over.

Why did the strategy fail even though it (a) formed a recognizable pattern of escalation; (b) convinced the North Vietnamese of the increasing risk to their industrial centers—they requested help from the Russians and the Chinese; (c) made it clear through diplomacy what the U.S. wanted; and (d) actually succeeded in destroying the designated targets?

The reasons had to do with the value the North attached to unification, the extent of Hanoi's influence over the Viet Cong, and the amount of pain that the U.S. strategy was able to inflict. In somewhat simple terms, North Vietnam valued unification greatly, just as the Koreans had, and mostly for the same reasons: here was a country that had recently undergone a forced partition; a country where a charismatic communist leader could rely on nationalism and his organizational apparatus in addition to Chinese and Russian support to create a whole state. Further, nationalist fervor (repeatedly stoked by the repressive brutality and incompetence of successive regimes in Saigon) provided the manpower for the insurgency: before Tet, nearly all of it was home-grown, with almost no direct presence of troops from the North. While Hanoi could (and did) provide material and moral support, it may not have been able to control the VC very well at all.

Finally, while industry would be important to a new country, it was not especially so to North Vietnam. It was too small and insignificant (12% of GNP in 1965), and its destruction did not present much of a threat to the civilians, who could have been hurt much more by the destruction of the dykes that would have caused flooding of the rice fields, and starvation. Notably, the U.S. refrained from attacking these even though the North Vietnam propaganda machine consistently claimed that it had. Not only that, but the Johnson administration went to great length to avoid civilian casualties, and since most of the major cities were evacuated by 1967, civilians became less vulnerable as the campaign progressed. Rolling Thunder seems to have killed about 52,000 civilians (0.3% of the NV population) which is a large number that, however, pales in comparison to the 2.2 million civilians killed in Japan (3%) and 1.1 million in Germany (1.6%) during WWII. Hence, the U.S. appears to have targeted the wrong thing (industrial base) in its attempt at coercion during the gradual-escalation phase.

When the U.S. administration realized that its coercive tactics were not succeed-

ing in bringing Hanoi to the negotiating table, it targeted the regime's ability to supply the Viet Cong. But the success of such an interdiction strategy was predicated on the North waging a conventional war instead of guerilla warfare. In a conventional war, fighting happens between regular military units along somewhat well-defined front lines, where each side must maintain a logistics lifeline to its rear that must supply the forward combat units. If one targets that line and the base that supplies it, then the forward units would be helpless. In a guerilla war, on the other hand, the fighting is done by decentralized small-scale units that rely on local support (villages). While the U.S. Army was engaged in conventional-style seek and destroy missions, Hanoi and the Viet Cong followed a guerilla strategy until after Tet. The Army attempted to draw the communists out in pitched battle where they would be exhausted quickly, but instead the VC struck whenever they pleased, and then withdrew rapidly before they could be engaged. Low-tech units with local support required only a fraction of the supplies a regular Army unit would. Control of population (both through terror and because the U.S. search and destroy missions tended to kill about six civilians for each VC, making the Americans unwelcome) enabled the VC to extract enough resources locally to support themselves. This means that even if the U.S. had been successful in curtailing Hanoi's direct supply, it would not have meant much. Not even for weapons and ammo, which the VC managed to obtain from the corrupt South Vietnamese army on the black market. To top all of this off, the bombing did not hinder the supplying from the North all that much. There were plenty of redundant trails, waterways, and rudimentary road lines, and the main roads were not utilized much, meaning that even if the U.S. had managed to degrade them enough to reduce their capacity by 25%, they would still have retained much more capacity than required at their levels of utilization. In other words, interdiction could not have worked because of the rudimentary, and therefore, ironically, relatively invulnerable, supply line from the North, and because the Viet Cong were not all that dependent on it anyway.

The final switch to a massive bombing campaign did inflict tremendous losses, but the falling production was soon picked up by North Vietnam's communist allies. As Pape reports, "From 1965 to 1968, North Vietnam received approximately $600 million in economic aid [compared to $95 million annual prior to Rolling Thunder] and $1 billion in military assistance [none before], while sustaining a loss of $370 million in measurable physical damage from bombing." In other words, the communists were resupplying North Vietnam faster than the U.S. was destroying its industrial capacity. In addition, civilian morale could not be effectively undermined in a country where the government possessed complete control of all means of communication, and dissemination of information. Totalitarianism combined with nationalism could provide a potent stimulant to endure grave sacrifices.

In retrospect, Rolling Thunder seems to have failed not because it was incompetent, but because some of its major assumptions were flawed, and so the coercive effort was mostly wasted. But why did Nixon succeed in 1972?

6 Nixon and Linebacker

In Vietnam, Richard Nixon began "Vietnamization," meaning shifting the war onto South Vietnamese shoulders. As he was pulling out US troops, he began secretly bombing Cambodia, a neutral state used by the communists to funnel troops into South Vietnam. This was a disaster—the *New York Times* revealed the "secret" bombing in March 1969—but, even worse, the bombings drove the communists deeper into Cambodia and destabilized the country and its government was overthrown in early 1970 by a right-wing military junta. Richard Nixon took advantage of the situation and on April 30, 1970 announced that the US could not act like a "pitiful, helpless giant," and that he was therefore invading Cambodia to clean out communists. The war he had promised to end, expanded.

Cambodia was ruined—by 1975 the Communists took over and created the most brutal regime the world had seen—the Khmer Rouge killed more of its own civilians as a fraction of the population than even accomplished murderers like Hitler, Stalin, or Mao. In the US, campuses exploded—at Kent State in Ohio and Jackson State in Mississippi protesters were shot and killed. In 1971, Congress repealed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. All too late—in 1971 Richard Nixon began bombing supply routes in Laos, making that country the most heavily bombed one in history. By mid-1971, communists gained the upper hand there as well.

The American draftees became demoralized, the US economy tanked. In August 1971, Richard Nixon imposed a wage-price freeze to curb inflation. The US dollar was no longer redeemable in gold. As the dollar went, so did much of US influence abroad. However, the freeze halted inflation and, just days before the elections of 1972, Henry Kissinger dramatically announced that "peace was at hand," a move carefully calibrated to enhance Richard Nixon's elector prospects.

By 1972, Vietnamization and pacification had begun to bear fruit. Even though the number of American soldiers steadily declined, the communist prospects in the South waned more rapidly. Marine tactics to win the "hearts and minds" of villagers (mostly by providing them with security against Viet Cong terror) were much more effective than the Army's devastating seek & destroy missions. While the VC controlled about 23% of the population in contested areas in 1968, they barely managed 3% by the end of 1971. Control of these areas was slipping from the communists, which made the guerilla strategy unworkable. They resolved to switch to a more conventional confrontation to defeat Vietnamization by defeating significant portions of ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). The Soviet Union and China obliged by sending tanks, artillery, planes, and SAMs. When the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) launched its Easter Offensive on March 30, 1972, it was a massive conventional invasion that broke through ARVN defenses, and wreaked great havoc on South Vietnamese morale. It was to halt this attack that Nixon ordered the 1972 bombings.

These followed the steadily progressing northward pattern again, and were com-

bined with a diplomatic effort to persuade the USSR and China to end their military assistance to Hanoi. But since North Vietnam perceived itself close to victory, its chief negotiator flatly refused Kissinger's demand to halt the offensive, or even continue with the negotiations. The U.S. correspondingly switched to Linebacker I: bombing designed to disrupt enemy supply lines, and troop concentrations behind the front. This time no economic or civilians sites were targeted. This campaign met with great success precisely for the reason its predecessor under Johnson had failed: the strategy that Hanoi now employed (large-scale conventional warfare) made it vulnerable to such interdiction. By June, the Easter Offensive, deprived of resources, ground to a halt, and then the ARVN started to regain ground. On October 22, North Vietnam agreed to a cease-fire. When South Vietnam's president Nguyen Van Thieu refused to sign it, the North began to slide from it, which precipitated the notorious Christmas bombing (Linebacker II). The problem Thieu had with the cease-fire was simple: it did not provide for the withdrawal of NVA troops from South Vietnam. Linebacker II was a deliberate repeat of Linebacker I and had a dual purpose: (a) to impress on the North that the U.S. could obliterate its ability to wage aggressive war; and (b) to reassure Thieu that the U.S. was committed to the defense of South Vietnam.

Despite cosmetic concessions that followed, the final agreement did not provide for withdrawal of North Vietnamese units from the South. Thieu acquiesced after being promised huge amounts of supplies, continued support during the post-war period, and full force assistance should North Vietnam violate the peace. In February 1973, America's longest war was over. The US troops pulled out in a thinly disguised defeat.

Two years later, North Vietnam launched a large-scale conventional invasion of the South. Despite Ford's (and Kissinger's) frantic pleas to honor Nixon's commitment to South Vietnam, Congress absolutely forbade any intervention. This time there would be no Linebacker to interdict NVA's supplies, and the ARVN was quickly shattered. Without American assistance, the unpopular South Vietnamese regime crumbled. Within a month, the new war ended—the North had succeeded in its dreams and Vietnam was unified and independent. Hundreds of thousands fled the country, and the new regime proceeded immediately with "reeducation" complete with labor camps, and the terror to which all communist societies are prone. On April 30, 1975, South Vietnam surrendered and on July 2, 1976 the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was created. Within several years, it was at war with neighboring Cambodia (which it invaded to remove the nightmarish Khmer Rouge), and with China.

The victory was grievously costly: over 58,000 Americans had lost their lives, and over 1.1 million Vietnamese solders were killed, along with close to 4 million civilians. North Vietnam, that "raggedly-ass little fourth rate country," as LBJ once called it, had defied the world's mightiest nation—and won.

7 The Lessons of Vietnam

Drawing lessons from history is a dangerous business, and none is more so than the Vietnam War. That the thinly disguised defeat came on the heels of an age that had seen America raise to a global position of power and moral authority did not help matters. The corruption of the Nixon White House, and the illegal domestic activities designed to suppress dissent cost the federal government the trust of its own citizens, a trust that would take a long time to earn back, and that would probably never be quite the same. The war showed that, happily, manufacturing consent in a democracy is an impossibility. And although such self-searching criticism during a war may put a liberal society at a disadvantage compared to a totalitarian foe like Stalin's USSR, Mao's China, Kim's North Korea, or Ho's North Vietnam, in the end it would also ensure the triumph of this system over them.

The war divided Americans like nothing had ever divided them before except slavery and secession. Still, despite all the turmoil one must remember that major demonstrations did not begin until relatively late into the fighting, after the government had repeatedly promised to deliver victory and failed. Some of the major lessons (from our perspective) must therefore be about why the U.S. lost this war. Whatever people say, it is incorrect to cite domestic politics as the cause: demonstrations were the product of failure, not its cause; students and draft-dodgers would never have forced the withdrawal if the government itself believed it could win; and for all the domestic discontent (including some truly reprehensible acts like actress Jane Fonda going to North Vietnam to pose on a tank with the enemy), the U.S. could have seen the war through to its end; after all, it had been through much worse several times before.

So what happened? What happened was a classic mismatch between the scope of political goals pursued, the size of the force brought to bear in order to achieve them, and the type of coercion selected. To put it rather simplistically, the U.S. wanted more than it was prepared to pay for. Coercion through bombing raids reflected the unwillingness of the government to commit the ground forces necessary to win a war of this type. The aim was to bypass ground operations altogether, and compel Hanoi to stop supporting the communist insurgency in the South by bringing the fighting to the North. Very tellingly, while Johnson's Rolling Thunder campaign failed to achieve its purpose, Nixon's Linebacker I and II did succeed in compelling North Vietnam to halt its ground offensive and seek peace terms with the U.S.

As we have seen, the major difference had to do with the tactics pursued by the North Vietnamese themselves, and the types of targets selected by the U.S. Under Johnson, the bombing aimed at undermining civilian morale and reducing the industrial base rather than concentrating exclusively on military targets. The idea harkened back to the days of WWII and the bombing raids on Germany and Japan: since the enemy government had to depend on its citizens to provide for the war, if their support was destroyed, the government would have to come to terms. How-

ever, industry was not that important to Hanoi, whose communist allies supplied with economic and military aid. The guerilla strategies the Viet Cong pursued in the South made it relatively invulnerable to interdiction. When Vietnamization and pacification began to change things, the guerillas found themselves with a shrinking resource base, and Hanoi was forced to switch to more conventional means, which were now exposed and vulnerable to the type of fighting at which the U.S. was good. Hence, the same interdiction could work under Nixon, bringing concessions from the North.

Contrary to popular perception, the lesson of Vietnam is not that America cannot win wars of this type. First, although the original tactics were bad, the U.S. forces gradually learned how to fight guerillas and win. The Marines were very effective in securing villages, and could provide protection against Viet Cong terrorism. It was this success that precipitated the 1972 invasion. Second, as Linebacker showed, bombing can work against conventional forces very well, and had there been American troops on the ground anywhere near the numbers there had been under Johnson, then the NVA would not have been able to remain in the South at all. If anything, Vietnam is a stern lesson about what can happen when America fails to see its commitments through to the end.

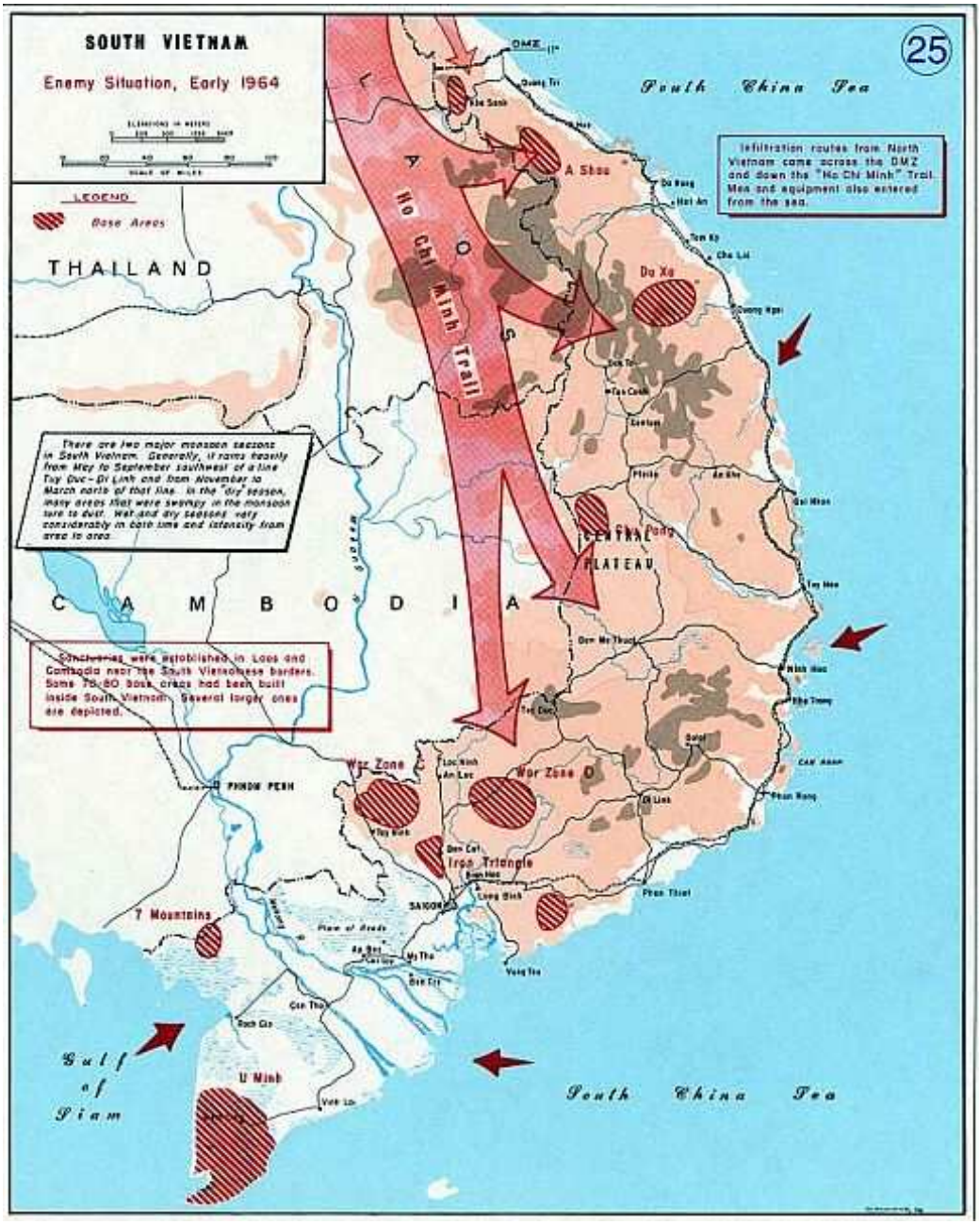

Figure 2: The Vietnam War, 1964.

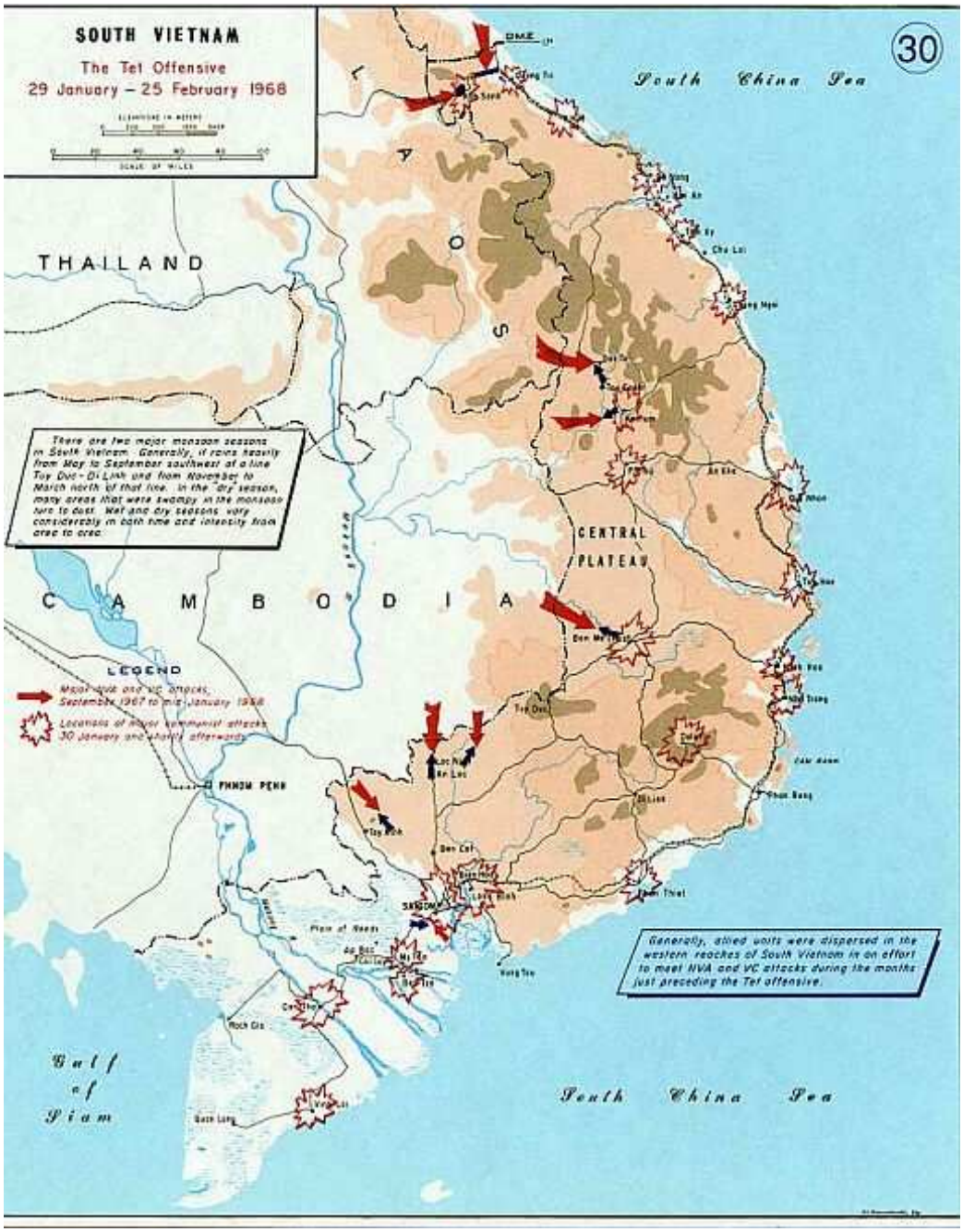

Figure 3: The Vietnam War: Tet Offensive, 1968.

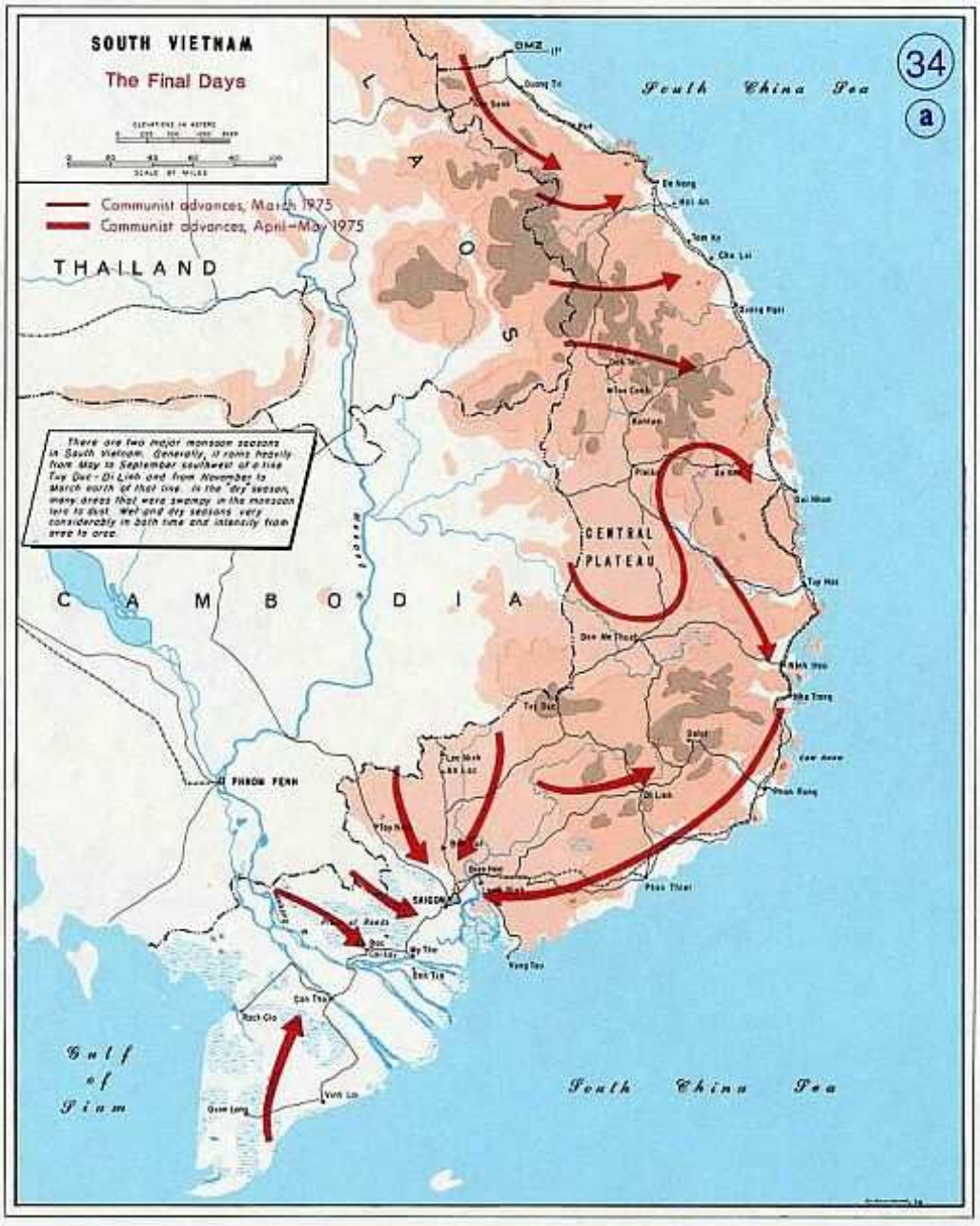

Figure 4: The Vietnam War: Conquest, 1975.