

What Vietnam Teaches Us

A new look at the brilliant yet flawed McGeorge Bundy illuminates mistakes we're still making today.

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For America, the Vietnam War was the traumatic event of the second half of the last century. Entered into with a brash self-confidence after a decade and a half of creative and successful foreign policy, our engagement ended with America as divided as it had not been since the Civil War. As a result, Congress cut off aid to Vietnam two years after the troops had been withdrawn, and the last Americans left Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) by helicopter from the roof of our embassy. No account of that period adequate to the emotion and drama of the time has yet appeared. The dwindling number of witnesses of the period remains traumatized by its passions or divided by their own pasts. For younger leaders, an understanding of the controversies of their fathers has proved elusive, obliging them to slide into the same dilemmas in their contemporary policies.

"Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam" does not fill that vacuum. It does, however, illuminate the five years (1961–1966) during which the defense of South Vietnam was Americanized. Tracing the efforts of one of the most prominent public servants of the time, it seeks to come to terms with America's entry into its tragedy.

McGeorge Bundy was dean of the faculty when I was at Harvard. For an entire generation of Harvard graduates, Bundy was the beau ideal of the academician-activist whose intellectual acuity was matched by devotion to public service. Brilliant and fiercely articulate, he was a warm and thoughtful human being behind the Boston Brahmin crust. He had had a spectacular academic career. Elected to the Harvard Society of Fellows, he became eligible for a faculty appointment without having to acquire a doctorate. He became the dean of the faculty at the age of 34. At Harvard the conviction was widespread that the next change of administration (whether Republican or Democrat) would find Bundy (himself a Republican) in high office. Many of his contemporaries saw in him a future secretary of state.

In 1961, John Kennedy appointed Bundy as national-security adviser. At that time, this office was considered an essentially administrative position. In one of the most spectacular career misjudgments ever, Paul Nitze turned it down in favor of a midlevel job in an operating department. Bundy created the modern portfolio of the national-security adviser. Since the flow of memoranda from various departments concerned with national security had become too vast, Bundy's office turned into a clearinghouse. Ever since, the National Security Council has prepared—or, at least, is in perhaps the best position to prepare—the range of options among which the president chooses (including, if the occasion requires, options not put forward by any department). If that task is neglected, the president flies blindly, driven from crisis to crisis, without the guidance of strategy.

For five years, Bundy performed his duties with the articulateness and deftness with which he had managed the Harvard faculty. This included the Berlin crisis, the Cuban missile period and the nuclear test-ban agreement. Then his grip loosened with the decline in the fortunes of the Vietnam War, whose public advocate and, to some extent, co-manager he had become. He retired in 1966, never to hold public office again.

After leaving office, Bundy became the target of David Halberstam's "The Best and the Brightest," which used him to illustrate the thesis that the cream of the establishment led America astray in Vietnam. The book set the tone for most of the subsequent assessment of the war. Bundy bore the opprobrium with dignity, never answering the criticisms directly and perhaps privately agreeing with some of them.

Toward the end of his life, he began, with a research assistant, to assemble materials for reconstructing the events that had pushed America from hope to despair. He died before he could begin the manuscript.

Bundy's researcher, Gordon M. Goldstein, has now turned their collaborative effort and some fragments of Bundy's writing into "Lessons in Disaster." It's his own effort, representing the researcher's view, not authorized by the Bundy family. It's also a strange yet fascinating book. No one is said to be a hero to his valet; this book permits one to extend the truism to research assistants. "Lessons in Disaster" is relentlessly hostile to its subject, not so much to Bundy's person—whom it treats respectfully—as his policies. With the hindsight of some decades, it helps explain many facets of Bundy's performance yet misses its tragedy. The book is an illuminating window into a seminal time. It is also further evidence of the inability of America to transcend the debates that tore it apart a generation ago.

Bundy successfully managed the legacy of America's postwar policy in Europe and toward the Soviet Union. Where he failed was in extending to Southeast Asia the policies that reconstructed Europe and eventually won the cold war. The difficulty was that Southeast Asia presented a different strategic problem. In Europe, governmental institutions had survived the ravages of the Second World War. The threats they faced were to their economic expectations—compounded by the Soviet troops along their borders. The Marshall Plan took care of the first threat; NATO addressed the second.

None of these conditions existed in South Vietnam. The dividing line in Vietnam was technically a demilitarized zone never accepted as an international frontier by Hanoi, which was attempting to undermine governmental institutions by guerrilla warfare. In this war without front lines, military containment took on a different meaning. In Europe, there were established states, the legitimacy of whose governments was firmly established; in South Vietnam, there was no legacy of a state at all. Governmental institutions had to be created while under constant military attack. In Europe, the basic challenge was territorial integrity; in Southeast Asia, it was governmental legitimacy.

The new Kennedy administration paid lip service to this distinction, but never solved how to act on it. The Truman and Eisenhower administrations had slowly increased the American commitment in South Vietnam. By the end of the Eisenhower administration, Hanoi had committed its forces in all countries of Indochina. During the transition period, Eisenhower had told the president-elect that if North Vietnamese infiltration continued, American combat forces should be sent to Laos.

The Kennedy administration accepted the conventional wisdom regarding the issues; it rejected the strategy. Like its predecessors of both parties, it assumed containment to be indivisible and the domino effect of the collapse of South Vietnam to be a kind of natural law. As described by Goldstein, Bundy and his senior colleagues defined the domino effect as involving the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea and Taiwan. The new Kennedy administration even added a philosophical refinement. Vietnam was no longer treated as one of many fronts in the global cold war but as the central front. Conventional aggression having been stymied by NATO, guerrilla warfare needed to be similarly frustrated in Vietnam. China and the Soviet Union were perceived as part of a joint enterprise to tip the global equilibrium.

With the perspective of nearly four decades, it is possible to challenge these assumptions. Communism has proved not to be monolithic; the dominoes did not fall with the collapse of South Vietnam (though 10 years of effort may have helped steady them); the problem of how to deal with guerrilla warfare has grown worse, not better.

Goldstein argues with some justice that Bundy should have raised these possibilities. And from the present perspective, it would be the task of the modern NSA to bring such issues to the attention of the president. But one must remember that governments run by addressing conventional wisdom, not by challenging it. Caught between established convictions and his premonitions, Bundy concentrated on

managing the crises in terms of familiar patterns. No cabinet-level official challenged that established view (not even George Ball, who opposed escalation in Vietnam for other reasons). Nor did many observers on the outside.

With departmental memoranda and personal letters seeking to influence the president, the real debate took place more or less ad hoc in the meetings of the National Security Council or at informal meetings of cabinet-level officials. Decisions were reached but no settled strategy was agreed upon. The administration slid into a series of ad hoc decisions that pre-empted Kennedy's strategic choice. Presidents, in any event, are prone to avoid confrontations, having reached their eminence in part by merging seemingly contradictory constituencies. Both Kennedy and Johnson, according to Goldstein, occasionally went so far as to instruct cabinet members on what recommendations they would welcome at formal meetings in order to avoid having to overrule some associate openly.

In reading the Goldstein book, one is struck by the informal, almost conversational, tone of the process as Bundy was feeling his way. Thus, in November 1961, Bundy wrote to the president: "The other day at the swimming pool, you asked me what I thought, and here it is. We should now agree to send about one division when needed for military action inside Vietnam." Goldstein reports no accompanying options paper, no definition of the meaning of "about one division," nor a definition of a desired strategic outcome.

Goldstein leaves little doubt that Kennedy was opposed to sending combat troops to Southeast Asia. He flatly refused to follow Eisenhower's recommendation, supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with respect to Laos in 1961. He resisted similar proposals concerning Vietnam in 1963. It was more the result of a visceral reluctance than a strategic judgment. In fact, on the formal level Kennedy was ambivalent, torn between considering the survival of South Vietnam essential for national security and being loath to achieve this goal with American combat forces. That decision could be postponed in 1963, but it became unavoidable in 1965 when Johnson was president and Vietnam was on the verge of collapse.

As it happened, Johnson's options and his dilemmas were made more acute by a decision taken in the last weeks of the Kennedy presidency, to which the loose procedures of the National Security Council staff made a fateful contribution.

Guerrilla war in a developing country elaborating its political institutions almost inevitably produces a dilemma that has heretofore proved insoluble. Since civil war is ultimately about legitimacy, and legitimacy is unachievable without security, a gap opens up between these requirements. Security is impossible without authority; legitimacy is ultimately unsustainable without consensus. But the time scale for achieving democratic consensus is longer than that for bringing about security.

As the guerrilla war raged in Vietnam in 1963, some American officials became convinced that the governing president's authoritarianism was a fundamental cause of the impasse. The administration came to believe that Vietnam's military would provide a more cohesive and perhaps more democratic governmental framework. On a weekend when both Kennedy and Bundy were out of town, the assistant secretary of state, together with an NSC staffer, contrived an instruction to the U.S. ambassador in Saigon that was used to trigger a military coup. President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother were assassinated. A series of coups followed during which a coherent strategy became ever more problematic. Hanoi saw in this turmoil an opportunity to introduce regular combat troops into the South.

Kennedy was assassinated three weeks later. The decision to send combat troops, left in abeyance in 1963, became Johnson's. Goldstein traces the evolution of the debate, in which the principal advisers—Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara and Bundy—and the Joint Chiefs of Staff strongly advocated a significant buildup of combat forces. Goldstein argues that Kennedy, while accepting the domino theory, would have lived with its consequences, including the communization of all of Southeast Asia, rather than send a large expeditionary force to Southeast Asia. But we cannot know his reaction had he been presented

with the strongly held, united views of his principal foreign-policy and security advisers—assuming that they would have presented their recommendations with comparable vehemence to a reluctant president.

When the United States goes to war, it should be able to describe to itself how it defines victory and how it proposes to achieve it. Or else how it proposes to end its military engagement and by what diplomacy. In Vietnam, America sent combat forces on behalf of a general notion of credibility and in pursuit of a negotiation whose content was never defined. The credibility point was reflected in an amazing Bundy statement quoted by Goldstein: that it would be better for America's credibility to lose after sending 100,000 men than not to have resisted Hanoi at all.

Another self-inflicted handicap was the reluctance to view Indochina as a single strategic theater. Eisenhower was almost certainly right when he described a defense of Laos as essential to the defense of Vietnam. But Bundy resisted that proposition with the argument to Kennedy, according to Goldstein, that "Laos was never really ours after 1954. South Vietnam is and wants to be." This distinction produced the anomalous situation in which half a million Americans fought to achieve a stalemate in Vietnam, a military objective rendered nearly impossible by enemy bases in Cambodia and supply lines through Laos.

As for negotiation, Bundy argued that once Hanoi's efforts to dominate South Vietnam were thwarted, an undefined compromise would emerge through diplomacy—in effect, a strategy seeking stalemate, not victory. But stalemate violates the maxim that the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The escape hatch of diplomatic compromise was based more on American nostalgia than Hanoi's mentality. Hanoi's leaders had fought a decade against France and battled the United States for a similar length of time, not to achieve a political compromise, but to prevail. The effort required to bring about a compromise was indistinguishable from the requirements of victory—as the administration in which I served had to learn from bitter experience.

A reviewer cannot pretend to sum up a generation's travail in a book review. A few observations will be in order:

- WHEN THE PRESIDENT IS ASKED TO CONSIDER GOING TO WAR, HE MUST BE PRESENTED, ABOVE ALL, WITH AN ANALYSIS OF THE GLOBAL STRATEGIC SITUATION ON WHICH THE RECOMMENDATION IS BASED.
- THE PURPOSE OF WAR IS VICTORY. STALEMATE IS A LAST RESORT, NOT A DESIRABLE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE.
- VICTORY NEEDS TO BE DEFINED AS AN OUTCOME ACHIEVABLE IN A TIME PERIOD SUSTAINABLE BY AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION.
- HAS TO BE PRESENTED TO THE PRESIDENT A SUSTAINABLE DIPLOMATIC FRAMEWORK.
- DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY MUST BE TREATED AS A WHOLE, NOT AS SUCCESSIVE PHASES OF POLICY.
- AUTHORITY FOR DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY MUST BE CLEARLY ASSIGNED.
- THE ADMINISTRATION AS WELL AS CRITICS SHOULD CONDUCT THEIR DEBATES WITH THE RESTRAINT IMPOSED BY THE KNOWLEDGE THAT THE UNITY OF OUR SOCIETY HAS BEEN THE HOPE OF THE WORLD.

Should Bundy have come to conclusions such as these earlier? This is the implication of Goldstein's book. But to do so, Bundy would have had to abjure the views of a generation avowed since Truman's disputes with MacArthur 15 years earlier—that force should be applied in minimum increments, that strategy and diplomacy were separate spheres to be conducted consecutively, that American principles applied in an undifferentiated manner globally were established maxims of a successful policy. These principles were implemented in Vietnam in the early 1960s by the best, not the worst, of their generation. If the policymakers lacked perspective, their critics lacked compassion.

Throughout history, every problem America had recognized had proved soluble by the application of resources and idealism. Vietnam proved obdurate. Mourning the assassination of a president with whom it had identified, and perplexed by an impasse to which its own theories had contributed, the intellectual establishment ascribed its traumas to a failure of the American experience and the moral inadequacy of its leaders. This turned the national debate from an argument over feasibility into a crusade increasingly settled by confrontations designed to demonstrate a moral indictment. In that sense, Bundy was victim as much as cause of the forces unleashed as America was obliged to adapt its history to a changing world.

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