

LESSONS LEARNED

Nguyen Ngoc Linh

Since the fall of Saigon I have had 35 years to think about what went wrong. Even before that fateful April 1975 I had had ten years of government service to witness from a front row seat many of the mistakes that American and Vietnamese leaders responsible for managing the war made in Vietnam. This afternoon I am not going to delve into the why and how of America's intervention into the Vietnam conflict. I am just going to offer my thinking about the lessons that can be learned from America's Vietnam experience.

From the very beginning of America's commitment in Vietnam there was a huge gap of understanding between Americans and Vietnamese of all stripes, a cultural gap that led from one misunderstanding to another about each other's intentions, good will, expectations and much else.

Indeed, the Americans with their gung-ho, can-do, task-oriented attitude have the tendency to take control in their partnership with the Vietnamese, even at the risk of stepping on our toes. On the other hand the Vietnamese, proud of their Confucian traditions and steeped in a millennial historical consciousness, resented the pushy attitude of many American advisors and the condescendence of American commanding generals caused them to resist or even ignore the recommendations of "our" allies.

A big factor that was overlooked was an effective information/propaganda campaign by the American side. Such a campaign never happened because the Americans did not even suspect that such a campaign was necessary. Another thing American officials should have done was to react ferociously to fallacious and misleading news reports in the American media. Instead the US kept silent, saying and doing nothing of consequence.

South Vietnam cannot bear responsibility for this because starting from the late 1960's the South Vietnam Ambassador to the US could not appear at a college campus without being subjected to an avalanche of abuse.

The said information campaign should have been aimed at multiple audiences: the Vietnamese people, the American people, the US military, the South Vietnamese military and the world at large. Before being sent to Vietnam American officials and troops should also be familiarized with various aspects of Vietnamese culture and way of life.

The understanding gap mentioned above led to fateful decisions on the American side such as encouraging the Vietnamese generals to stage a coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother advisor which ended tragically in their deaths. This, in my estimation, marked the beginning of the end of South Vietnam in its fight against the invaders from the North.

Once President Johnson decided to send combat troops to help South Vietnam the American generals quickly took charge of the war. They fought a conventional war against communist insurgents who at first only fought the only way Vietnamese knew how against a superior enemy, i.e. they fought as guerillas, disappearing only to reappear when the superior force moves on. The fact that the war was often directed from the White House only added another layer of intervention which tied the hands of the generals in the field.

While the communist invaders and the local Viet Cong insurgents could roam all over the South, the American and South Vietnamese sides were not allowed to go North to bring the war to where it hurts. For a long time they were not even allowed to go into Cambodia where the North Vietnamese withdrew whenever they needed rest and recuperation. In other words, the American generals were given the responsibility of fighting the war but they were not allowed to win, only to repel attacks when and if they come.

Even after President Nixon went to China and met with Mao Tse-tung, the Americans were still leery of Chinese intervention should our side take the fight to North Vietnam. Thanks to documents recently declassified Calvin Woodward of the Associated Press wrote an article on May 29, 2006 in

which he quoted Henry Kissinger, then National Security Advisor, telling Prime Minister Chou En-lai something to the effect that “in my view, after peace is restored, the political orientation of what comes after is of no concern to the U.S” and that “if we can live with a communist government in China, we ought to be able to accept it in Indochina.” This practically amounts to giving assurance that the United States would not engage in Vietnam after a communist victory.

At the height of its engagement, the U.S. had half a million troops in Vietnam. It had been suggested that had the Americans deployed these men on our side the 17th parallel from the Ben Hai river all the way into Laos, and had the American navy mined the port of Hai Phong interdicting all sea traffic bringing war supplies to the communists, they could have choked off the Ho Chi Minh trail to the invaders from the North, leaving it to the South Vietnamese armed forces to take care of the guerilla insurgents in the South—something we could have handled without much difficulty.

In fact the Ho Chi Minh trail could have been cut off with far less than the 500,000 I mentioned above. In a study that General Bruce Palmer (or is it David Palmer) did at the time he even suggested that 60,000 troops could have done the job. The government of Thailand also suggested more or less the same strategy using a multinational force composed of American, Thai, Laotian and Vietnamese troops.

With such a strategy, the U.S. would not have lost the more than 58,000 killed in action and untold numbers of wounded, and the anti-war movement would never have had enough wind in their sail to keep up their opposition to the war and to pressure Congress to cut off all assistance to the South, leaving it defenseless against the North Vietnamese invaders.

The greatest irony of the Vietnam war was when tired of the conflict, President Nixon thought of Vietnamization as a way to put the whole burden on the south Vietnamese army. The word Vietnamization implies that during the entire ten years of massive American intervention the only ones fighting were the Americans while the million or so Vietnamese troops and militia were sitting on their behinds watching the show.

Nothing could be further from the truth. While American bravery in places such as Khe Sanh, essentially a diversionary battle, was glorified in the American press, untold battles fought and won in places like An Loc, Quang Tri and many other locations by the South Vietnamese armed forces were ignored by the American journalists some of whom even had the temerity to call our heroic fighters “rabbits,” predicting as early as 1968 that the end was near despite the fact that the communists suffered forty thousand casualties, or half of the attacking force in their Tet offensive of 1968. I still cannot understand how American media gurus such as Walter Cronkite could interpret a colossal communist defeat as a communist victory.

“Rabbits” indeed those Vietnamese troops who suffered nearly half a million casualties while fighting to defend South Vietnam and who, by some calculation, killed four times as many communist “lions.”

Vietnamization of the war should have been in place or rather should have been left alone from the very beginning of the American participation. Because they took over the direction of the war our American allies stripped us of our just cause as we fought against the aggressors and by the same token they also helped to reinforce the communists’ claim of being patriots defending the motherland against the American imperialists and to accuse us of being American puppets.

American journalists were free to roam all over the country, interview anyone they please, film and televise all the most shocking horrors of the war. Thus, for the first time in the history of the American media, the war was brought into American living rooms every evening and contributed to persuading the American public of the extreme cost of a war fought ten thousand miles from home, wasting American lives and taxpayers’ dollars.

As far as the Vietnamese side was concerned we also made monumental mistakes.

With the encouragement and even the blessing of the highest ranking American officials our politically immature top ranking generals staged a coup against a democratically elected President and murdered both him and his brothers, Nhu and Can.

Yet, after seizing power the generals were incapable of governing the country and tried coups and countercoups against one another, thus sapping whatever energy there remained in the country to fight the Viet Cong.

When the communists started their final push against South Vietnam President Thieu who, inspired by his American counterparts, also managed the war from Independence Palace, ordered the army to pull out of the First and Second Army Corps in such a hurry and without any planning whatsoever that panic set in and the various highways leading South were clogged with tens of thousands of refugees and evacuating troops, and under constant communist attack became highways of death.

This tragic mistake accelerated the takeover of South Vietnam by the communists who were only wishfully thinking of victory and their politburo only made tentative plans to take over the South by 1976 at the earliest.

The South Vietnam government and its information arm did a heroic effort to counter the anti-war movement in the United States but were not effective against a movement supported by the entire communist world, with the backing of both the Soviet Union and Red China.

In terms of lobbying, our diplomatic representatives in the U.S. were too busy trying to read the intentions of the American government and the Congress, and did not spend enough time cultivating meaningful public relations efforts aimed at the American public at large.

Furthermore, as Ambassador Bui Diem found out, even if there was any kind of debate with the anti-war crowd our people would have been too polite and debate usually degenerated into psychological theater of sarcasm and vitriolic accusations. Debate such as it was became an alley fight and demanded the psychological and rhetorical skills and aggressiveness for this kind of fight.

Truth was no longer important. Even US government people could not debate because they were too civilized when facing crowds that paraded in the streets of America's capital the flag of the Viet Cong enemy who was killing and maiming our boys every day. During their demonstrations they even shouted in unison "Ho, Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh." Imagine anyone shouting "Heil Hitler" at rallies in Washington during WWII. He would most likely be lynched or shot on the spot.

Inside South Vietnam our information agencies were not effective in countering the communist propaganda machine which was quite persuasive when combined with long daggers at night and death threats against the defenseless south Vietnamese population in the countryside.

From 1965 to 1972, as the head of the National Broadcasting System, then President of Vietnam Press and spokesman for the Prime Minister, then Director General of Information and Propaganda concurrently member of the Cabinet, then Press officer for the South Vietnam delegation to the Paris Peace Talks, I do bear a share of responsibility for not having done my best to convince President Thieu and the government to send our best and brightest to the U.S. to confront the anti-war movement and spread the good word about South Vietnam's effort to try and stop the advance of communism into the countries of Southeast Asia.

Later Overseas Information Offices were opened in Paris, London, Tokyo and Washington, but they came too late to make a difference.

It is my wish that from the lessons learned from the Vietnam War today's American leaders will be more effective in dealing with the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the other hot spots of the world. It is in this spirit that I offer my thoughts about why we lost in Vietnam.

Nguyen Ngoc Linh
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Nnguyen829@yahoo.com