

U.S. war effort was linked to secret bombing campaigns over Cambodia, already discussed, and over Laos.

Two different air wars were fought over Laos from 1968 through 1972. The first, called "Barrel Roll," was over a north plateau region called the Plain of Jars. It was directed at encampments of the NVA and Pathet Lao, a guerrilla force of about 35,000 men who were the Laotian equivalent of the Vietcong. Some villages also were bombed. The second bombing campaign was carried out in southern Laos against the Ho Chi Minh Trail used by the North Vietnamese to move men and supplies into South Vietnam. Over the course of this campaign U.S. forces dropped a total of 2.2 million tons of bombs.

On March 31, 1972, North Vietnam launched the largest offensive since Tet 1968, a conventional invasion across the DMZ by 120,000 NVA troops led by Soviet tanks and artillery. The U.S. had only 100,000 military personnel, including 6,000 combat troops, left in Vietnam. Nixon responded with the largest bombing campaign of the war (code named Linebacker), the mining of Haiphong Harbor, and a naval blockade of North Vietnam.

Almost all oil storage facilities and 70 percent of electrical power generating capacity in the north were destroyed. The new laser-guided smart bombs smashed

many bridges and railroads. Interdiction reduced overland imports from 160,000 to 30,000 tons a month. Mining the Haiphong Harbor cut seaborne imports from 250,000 tons a month to nearly zero.

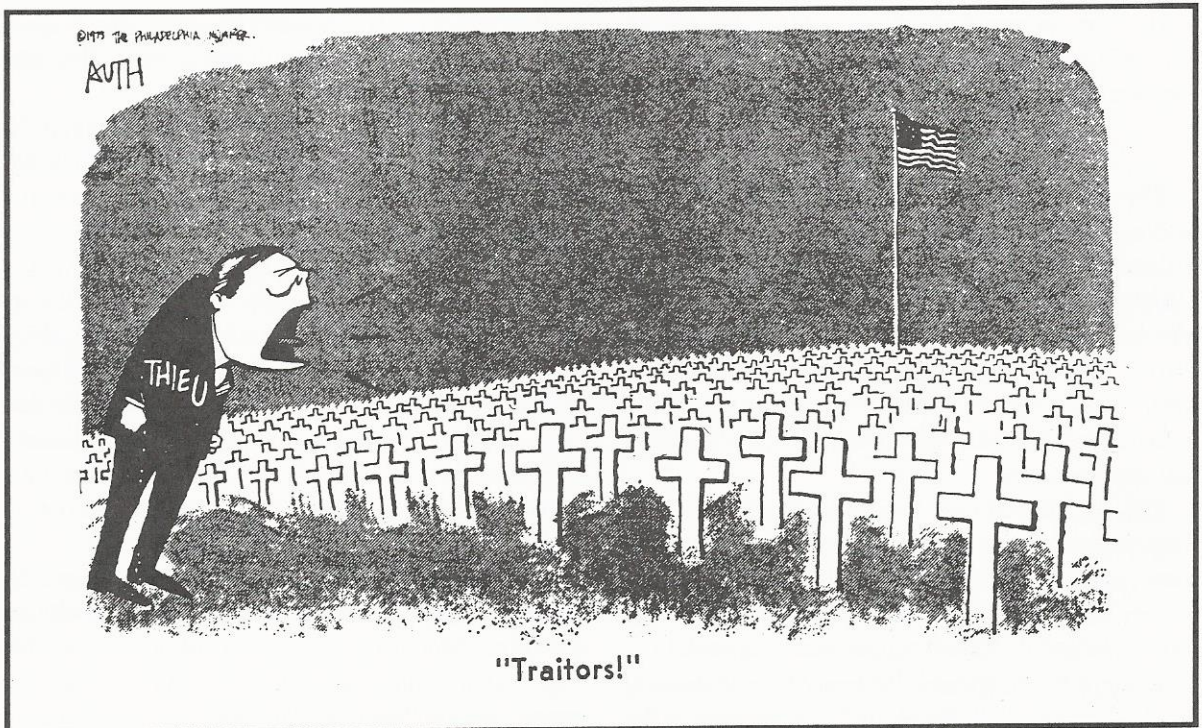
Air power alone took 120,000 North Vietnamese lives. Truong Nhu Tang of the Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government explained that as the summer went on, it was obvious that the losses were more than could be sustained and that the territorial advances could not be held. Negotiations to get the Americans out of the war were imperative.

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## U.S. Disengagement: 1972-1973

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By October 1972, the negotiating teams in Paris produced a peace treaty agreeable to the U.S. and North Vietnam. South Vietnamese President Thieu charged the U.S. with betraying his government and opposed the agreement. After his re-election, Nixon instructed Kissinger to address Thieu's concerns. On November 20th, Kissinger presented Hanoi's Le Duc Tho with sixty-nine amendments to the agreement demanded by Thieu.



The peace talks resumed, but broke down completely on December 13th. Two days later Nixon gave Hanoi an ultimatum to return to the table within 72 hours. When it passed, he unleashed the most intensive bombing of the entire war, known as Linebacker II. In eleven days, 740 B-52 and 1,000 other aircraft sorties dropped over 20,000 tons of bombs on the Hanoi-Haiphong area.

Hanoi's air defense, bolstered by an estimated 850 Soviet-made SAMS (surface-to-air missiles), had been much improved. The U.S. Air Force acknowledged 15 B-52s and 11 other aircraft shot down, 33 aviators killed and 33 captured. The North Vietnamese claimed over 1,600 of their people killed and thousands wounded.

This brought forth a storm of protest from world leaders, including the Pope. China and the Soviet Union threatened to withdraw support from the negotiations unless the bombing raids were stopped. Members of Congress made it clear they would impose legal constraints upon return from Christmas recess. Nixon's popularity rating fell to 39 percent overnight.

Hanoi's air defenses now were crippled, but so was the Nixon Presidency. Both nations were war weary and world leaders demanded a settlement. On December 30, 1972, by mutual agreement, Nixon stopped the bombing and the North Vietnamese delegation returned to the negotiating table. Nixon quickly surrendered most of the changes demanded by Thieu. On January 27, 1973, the Paris Accords were signed, ending America's longest war.

#### *North Defeats South: 1973-1975*

The ordeal was just beginning for South Vietnamese leaders, however. The treaty allowed North Vietnam to maintain almost 150,000 troops in the south. It also placed restrictions upon the amount of aid that South Vietnam could receive, although no restrictions were placed upon aid for North Vietnam. The American public was relieved to see this long nightmare come to an end. The Thieu administration in the south was angry and apprehensive.

The U.S. turned over immense amounts of equipment and matériel to the South Vietnamese prior to the treaty, and promised more. Thieu had an army of over one million and the third largest air force in the world. Nixon pledged continued support and guaranteed that U.S. troops would return if the treaty were violated by North Vietnam. Still, the North Vietnamese were dug

in and the ARVN could not expect to maintain the same level of firepower as when the U.S. was involved.

By the beginning of 1975, over 300,000 North Vietnamese troops with 700 tanks were poised to take over the south. Aided by strategic lapses by Thieu, North Vietnam's spring offensive triumphed on May 1, 1975. Some criticized the U.S. for abandoning its ally. However, few would claim that anything short of U.S. re-entry into the war would have forestalled the final outcome.

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## Conclusion

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In the wake of this defeat, many Americans have been tempted to look for scapegoats in Congress, the media, the universities, and the anti-war movement. A poll by Louis Harris in 1979 found that 73 percent of the public and 89 percent of Vietnam-era Veterans agreed: "The trouble in Vietnam was that our troops were asked to fight in a war which our political leaders in Washington would not let them win."

One well-known conservative critic of the U.S. war plan in Vietnam is Colonel Harry Summers (retired). For him "the most frustrating aspect of the Vietnam conflict" is that the U.S. armed forces won "every major battle of the war, yet North Vietnam, rather than the United States, triumphed in the end."

Summers believes the problem was that America's basic strategy was flawed. In his view, the U.S. should have been much less concerned with the Vietcong and pacification. Instead, it should have defined the war as a conventional confrontation between North Vietnam and the United States and its ally in the south. Having done this, President Johnson should have rallied public support for a full declaration of war. This would have enabled Johnson to raise taxes, call up the reserves, place a cordon across Laos and invade North Vietnam, with no restriction on bombing. Summers claims that China and the Soviet Union would have stayed out of the fight and the U.S. would have won the war.

Other experts contend that Summer's proposals would have been impossible to implement politically or militarily. Moreover, Summers' conjecture about the responses of China and the Soviet Union cannot be proven. Such actions carried the potential risk of a much

greater and more devastating war.

As the discussion of public opinion polls in Chapter 7 makes clear, from the start, most Americans did not want to risk American boys in a land war in Asia, were very concerned about China coming into the war, and did not think the South Vietnamese government could be saved.

Contrary to Summers, others have said that the fundamental flaw in the U.S. war plan was that U.S. leaders defined the conflict too narrowly in military terms. As Tilford reminds us, "Basic strategy courses teach that war is more than a contest between armed forces. It is a struggle between nations that incorporates economic, cultural, social, and political, as well as military, dimensions." In Vietnam, there was far too little knowledge of the local political situation, far too little appreciation of the determination and appeal of the enemy, and far too little attention to counterinsurgency and pacification.

In 1984, journalist William Broyles Jr. returned to Vietnam where he had served as a Marine lieutenant during the war. Broyles interviewed several Vietnamese generals and soldiers about their strategy. Asked why they persisted despite the enormous firepower against them, many responded in paraphrases of the simple but powerful slogan of Ho Chi Minh: "Nothing is more important than independence and freedom." Americans viewed the war through the prism of Cold War ideology as between communism and capitalism. For most Vietnamese, however, race and nation were much more important forces.

Still, Broyles persisted, American helicopters were extremely mobile and artillery and B-52s awesomely destructive. How could the Vietnamese win against all that? The Vietnamese answer was that they prevailed by turning America's superior military strength against her. One soldier replied, "We learned to build special shelters, to decoy your artillery and planes with sham positions, to tie you to your firebases and helicopters so that they worked against you."

Military technology, by itself, cannot prevail. Winning or losing depends primarily on the motivation of the troops, nourished by the support of the people. When people believe in a cause, they are capable of extraordinary sacrifices; and, soldiers are capable of extraordinary courage. In South Vietnam, however, that was not the case. The ARVN had little public support, especially in the countryside, and suffered a

high rate of desertion (more than 20 %). It also abandoned or sold a great many U.S. manufactured weapons to the insurgents. Fewer than one in ten generals in the survey by Gen. Kinnard saw the ARVN as "an acceptable fighting force."

The U.S. military didn't have much support in Vietnam either. In an interview with the *New Republic* magazine, President Thieu himself stated: "The main reason the Vietcong remain so strongly entrenched is that people...still believe there is little difference between the French whom they called colonialists and the Americans whom they call imperialists."

To win the crucial battle for hearts and minds necessary to govern South Vietnam, the U.S. and its allies had to win the loyalty of the people with social, political and economic reforms. At the very least, they needed to broaden the popular base of the government by bringing in the Buddhists and the "Third Force" advocates for democratic reforms. They also needed to implement programs to redistribute land so as to reduce hunger and malnutrition. Perhaps the above would not have been sufficient; but there is no question that they were necessary.

In areas under their control, the communists won the support of many peasants by giving them land to farm. Also, as John F. Kennedy's advisors warned him, the communists were able to appeal to the force of nationalism in mobilizing people against the "white faces" with guns.

The war in Vietnam showed clearly that technology could be overcome by human ingenuity and determination. The communists persisted despite twice the per capita battle death rate as Japan in World War II. In fact, only a handful of countries in the past 100 years have accepted such tremendous losses. Tilford proposes that perhaps *the* most important factor in the war was "enemy determination":

The North Vietnamese had decided that they were not going to be defeated. If U.S. air strikes knocked down a bridge, hordes of peasants mobilized to repair the destruction caused by the bombs, to build fords, or to put in an underwater bridge. The bombing may even have strengthened the resolve of a people who were culturally inured to adversity.

Many in the military understood this U.S. foreign policy disaster all too well. During the war, playwright

Arthur Miller was invited to speak at West Point. After his talk, he went to a reception at a young colonel's house. Miller reports: "Some eight or ten officers, all of them Vietnam veterans and their wives, sat around until three that morning unburdening themselves, trying to make it clear to me not that they were losing the war because they had one hand tied behind their backs, but because they were trying to fight a political and moral conflict with explosives. The war, despite all the bravery of their men, had somehow shamed the service."

When it was all over, Kinnard asked the generals who had commanded in Vietnam whether the war was worth the effort in view of the casualties and the disruption of American politics and society. More than half (53%) said the war either had not been worth it or should not have progressed beyond an advisory effort.

As we shall see in Chapter 12, radical, liberal, and conservative perspectives still compete with each other in U.S. foreign and military policy debates. They all agree, however, that political leaders must inform the public of the likely costs of a foreign war before making

such a commitment. Public support is essential. Few wars are cheap and, as the Soviet Union learned in Afghanistan, many can be long and frustrating. No nation should go to war unless it is willing and able to bear its costs.

Because war is not just a conflict between soldiers, but involves entire nations, an effective war plan must have social, political, and economic as well as military aspects. This means that we need to understand the cultures and political environments of the countries in which we are involved.

Leaders should not deceive the public and its representatives in order to manipulate consent to war. Eventually the truth will come out, and disengagement is far more costly and difficult than initial avoidance. The public needs a cause it can believe in for its sons to march off to war, and that cause must be solidly based in clearly stated national principle and interest.

American power is not infinite. It must be exercised with great care and only where our vital national interests clearly are at stake. Few today believe that Vietnam ever qualified by these standards.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what ways did industrial leaders influence U.S. military policy?
2. "Rules of Engagement" are the rules that govern the conditions under which U.S. forces could fire on a suspected enemy. Do such rules make sense in a guerrilla conflict?
3. After 1968, many American soldiers in Vietnam resisted the war effort. How did they do this and what is your opinion of their actions?
4. Why were many Vietnamese hostile toward the government of South Vietnam? What role did ARVN (Army, Republic of Vietnam) play in this relationship?
5. What were the goals of the Strategic Hamlet Program? How did it work? Why did the program fail?
6. During wartime, should we permit the military to lie to political leaders and the public in the name of national security? If not, what can we do to prevent it? What might be the consequences?
7. In the spring of 1967, General William Westmoreland announced that the "cross-over point" had been reached. What did he mean? Was this assertion wrong? Why?
8. What is meant by the statement "the airwar could destroy the land, but it could not defeat the people"? If this statement is true, why do you think that we continued the bombing for so long?
9. In what ways were U.S. efforts to "win" the war in Southeast Asia counterproductive? Do you think that U.S. civilian and military leaders have learned any lessons from the experience in Southeast Asia? If so, what are those lessons?