

Why the United States Lost the Vietnam War

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Discuss the Reasons Why America Couldn't Win the Vietnam War

Between the years of 1945 and 1975, America fought its longest war. After World War II, several countries found themselves under the leadership of other nations, such is the case with Vietnam. As Palmer (1984) explained, towards the conclusion of World War II, the allies placed British Indian and French troops in control of Vietnam. Although the British and the French failed to enforce policy in the Northern extent of Vietnam, they managed to create a secure hold south of the 16th parallel. "The British, sympathetic to the French position, persuaded the allies to turn over responsibility in the south to the Free French in October 1945" (Palmer, 1984, p. 3). The French, battered by the destruction of World War II, attempted to supply resources by developing colonies in Vietnam. However, many Vietnamese disliked the French and preferred their own governance. The Vietnamese people organized a guerilla-type fighting force to drive out the French resulting in a stalemate between 1946 and 1954 (Disselkamp, n.d.). By 1954, the French were losing interest in the war, even though the U.S. had been financing about 75% of the costs (Palmer 1984, p. 6). The United States entered Vietnam, primarily due to the Domino Theory regarding the potential spread of Communism. Bruce Palmer (1984) stated "One goal that held steady throughout was to develop a viable nation that could withstand subversion and block communist expansion" (p. 28). Communism was growing and the U.S became concerned about the spread of Communism to other nations. The Vietnam War was lengthy, complex and, as many will argue, unwinnable. In its nearly thirty years, the Vietnam War is a solemn reminder of how more than 58,000 Americans (Herring, 1979) lost their lives in a war that many believe the United States should never have been involved in. Historians and military strategists over the years have analyzed and debated the reasons that contributed to the U.S. loss in Vietnam. While there are numerous reasons and justifications as to why the U.S. lost the Vietnam War, this essay

will highlight four characteristics that contributed to the defeat: how the U.S. media coverage biased public opinion; the difficulty troops had in an unpredictable terrain; the inability of the U.S. to adopt a decisive strategy; and the military support Vietnam received all contributed to a disastrous war effort.

The Vietnam War would become the first war in history to be reported in a way that was accessible to many Americans. Not only were traditional methods of newspaper or magazine available, but with the introduction of television, the war was seen in a whole new perspective. C. Mahlmann explained that every night, television stations would report the number of casualties as well as new footage from the war. However, it later became apparent, that the footage was sometimes taken out of context, negatively portraying U.S. soldiers on the battlefield (personal interview, February 19, 2017). Additionally, still-life photos, which permitted the public to assume the story behind the picture, played a major factor in the American citizen's interpretation of the war. While video footage was commonly utilized, it was the "...daily photographic coverage over the long term of the conflict [that] slowly undermined military and political claims of a justifiable and winnable war" (Kennedy, 2007-2008). Furthermore, certain photographs became symbolic of the American presence in Vietnam. For example, Malcolm Brown's June 1963 photograph of a Buddhist monk who set himself on fire on a Saigon Street and Ron Haeberle's March 1968 photograph of women and children killed in the My Lai massacre, negatively biased the American public's interpretation of the war (Kennedy, 2007-2008). Moreover, some journalists reported incorrect information, especially during and after the Tet Offensive. According to Richard Nixon's *No More Vietnam* (1985), "Although it was an overwhelming victory for South Vietnam and the United States, the almost universal theme of media coverage was that we had suffered a disastrous defeat... [T]he steady

drumbeat of inaccurate stories convinced millions of Americans that we had lost a major battle” (Dudley, Bender & Leone 1990, p. 79). The negative reportage of the war demoralized many Americans to the point that protests became prominent. While the media’s reporting of the conflict did not result directly in the loss of the Vietnam War, it is largely responsible for the lack of support as well as the inhumane reception many soldiers encountered when they returned home. “Vietnam veterans found themselves stereotyped as ‘baby-killers’, ‘drug abusers’, and ‘psychopaths’” (Dudley, et al. 1990, p. 145). Thus, as troops returned home from their service in Vietnam, their war was not over. Rather, they had simply traded the battlefields of Vietnam for the criticism by the American public.

Before facing the battle on their own land, Vietnam soldiers experienced an unforeseen obstacle that tested the traditional methods of the United States forces. The U.S. military was not properly prepared for either the terrain, or the simplistic tactics used by the North Vietnamese. In the *Minneapolis Tribune* (1981), Stanley Karnow asserts, “[T]he Vietnam conflict was waged in an environment too complex and mysterious for Americans to comprehend” (Dudley, et al. 1990, p. 69). This assumption emphasizes the homeland advantage of the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong also possessed an endless array of tactics to ambush the U.S. soldiers such as to, hide quickly, replenish soldiers and attack once more. The forests also allowed the Viet Cong to design and conceal horrific, yet effective, traps that were capable of killing several U.S. soldiers at one time. They would dig large pits into the ground, place sharpened bamboo spikes inside, and cover the pit in camouflage (Turner, n.d.). The Viet Cong, as an efficient and creative force, also crafted homemade weaponries and bombs, some of which were indirectly supplied by the enemy. After U.S air raids, an estimated 20,000 tons of undetonated explosives were recycled as bombs that were, in turn, used against the American troops (“Guerilla Tactics”, n.d.). Although primitive,

these tactics were responsible for a surprisingly large percentage of American casualties, especially as compared to previous wars. Statistics recorded in Albert Marrin's *America and Vietnam* (1992) highlight that "Booby traps and mines accounted for 11 percent of all American deaths...as compared to 3 or 4 percent in World War II and Korea" (p. 137). Not only did the Viet Cong take full advantage of the jungle environment, they also used underground tunnels for a variety of uses. These tunnels contributed to a large portion of the Viet Cong's success because they were so useful, from caring for the wounded to gathering additional supplies (Turner, n.d.). Moreover, it was especially dangerous for U.S. soldiers to traverse these tunnels because, as similar to the aboveground terrain, there was always a possibility of lethal traps or hidden enemies. Because the U.S military had never experienced such an environment, it struggled to achieve its traditional goal of search-and-destroy. Unlike the terrain of the Korean War, military leaders found it especially hard to successfully plan out attacks in the Indo-Chinese jungles. The accessibility and topography of Korea allowed U.S. naval and air offensives to successfully target the enemy, however, Vietnam's attachment to the mainland and the mountainous topography lessened the abilities of capable ships and airplanes (Record, 1998, p. 3). Thus, Vietnam's diverse landscape detrimentally affected the amount of destruction the Americans could inflict from great distances, whether from plane or by ship. Furthermore, this same dilemma hindered the distribution of supplies to the U.S troops. C. Mahlmann recalled the Viet Cong knew the terrain well and prevented ammunition and other supplies from getting to where it was needed most, thus "keeping [personnel] from doing their job" (Personal Communication, February 19, 2017). Unquestionably, the inability to deliver vital supplies to soldiers only worsened the anxiety and psychological issues the majority of the troops were already experiencing.

Admittedly, the U.S. government's failure to adopt a productive strategy of attack led to successful, proficient attacks by the Viet Cong. Bolstered by the success of the Cold War, the U.S. assumed that a war in Vietnam would be an easy way to halt the Domino Theory. While the U.S. thought of itself as a juggernaut, the strategy it chose to implement was not sufficient. The U.S. was prepared to fight a war in which there was a clear distinction between friend and foe, and there would be an opportunity for a continuous push against the enemy. However, after the U.S. arrived in Vietnam, the U.S. began to struggle in an unprecedented way. Although the U.S. Army employed massive amounts of firepower with search and destroy strategies, they should have developed a strategy incorporating counterinsurgency, a tactic focused on gathering and supporting local governments to fight against their aggressors. (McAllister 96). Nevertheless, the employment of local citizens to support the American mission proved difficult. The reason was the difficulty for the U.S. to gather support from the South Vietnamese because the citizens were not used to being part of a singular nation (Palmer, 1984, p. 174). Not only was the enemy hard to distinguish, the South Vietnamese were not accustomed to being under one ruler or government, leading some Southern Vietnamese to resist U.S. involvement. As a result, some South Vietnamese governments viewed the U.S. as an intimidating oppressor rather than a force to assist them. Hence, the lack of a solid, cohesive relationship between local governments and U.S. forces undermined the overall effort to prevent the Communist takeover of South Vietnam. James McAllister (2010, p. 123) infers, "As the authors of the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Field Manual (2007) suggest, 'U.S. forces committed to a COIN (counterinsurgency) effort are there to assist a HN [host nation] government. The long-term goal is to leave a government able to stand by itself. In the end, the host nation has to win on its own. Achieving this requires development of viable local leaders and institutions. U.S. forces and agencies can help, but HN elements must

accept responsibilities to achieve real victory.’’. Therefore, without the full support of local governments, the U.S. mission in Vietnam was set up to fail.

While it was acknowledged that North Vietnam received support from other Communist countries, the amount of support they received could not be determined until recently. According to George C. Herring (1979), after 1965, the amount of aid the Soviet Union supplied grew substantially, permitting the use of Soviet fighter planes, surface-to-air missiles and tanks. Further, statistics recorded in Albert Marrin’s *America and Vietnam* (1992) indicate “The Soviets had given North Vietnam 8,000 antiaircraft guns...radar” (p. 99). With the supply of these precise antiaircraft guns, North Vietnam could then defend against the U.S.’s constant air offense. Not only did the Viet Cong receive assistance from USSR, but it benefited even more so from the aid of Communist China. Although the 1954 Geneva Agreements prohibited the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from supplementing its military base, Beijing intervened by sending Hanoi massive quantities of ammunition and weapons (Zhang p. 735). Specifically, “Between 1955 and 1963, China provided the DRV with 247 million yuans’ worth of military aid, including 240,000 guns, 2,730 pieces of artillery, 15 planes, 28 naval vessels, 175 million rounds of ammunition and other...supplies” (Zhang, 1996). Therefore, the supplying of munitions, vehicles and other equipment that North Vietnam received contributed significantly to their overall success throughout the war. Certainly, China did not limit its support to only weaponry, it also provided significant manpower that was considerably underestimated at the time. During the war, U.S. intelligence projected fewer than 50,000 Chinese troops supported North Vietnam. However, according to (Whiting, n.d., p.74) it is reported that a total of 320,000 Chinese troops served in North Vietnam between 1965 and 1969, with 170,000 troops being present at any one time (Zhang, 1996, p. 759). China knew that their understated involvement would enable them

to push the U.S. away from its own borders and keep the war south in Vietnam. Clearly, China was concerned that if the U.S. was successful in liberating and establishing South Vietnam as a functioning nation, then a gateway into China could be opened, possibly resulting in conflict.

Assuredly, the Vietnam War was not lost due to lack of military strength or willingness of troops to fight. Rather, the impact of U.S. journalism, the difficult terrain, the failed strategies and the support received by North Vietnam are all variables that resulted in the defeat of the Vietnam War. While South Vietnam eventually fell into the hands of Communism in 1975, the U.S. involvement in the war subtly hindered the spread of Communism into all of Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, upon returning home, U.S. troops did not receive the praise, appreciation or respect that veterans from previous wars received. Rather, Vietnam veterans were shunned and rejected by much of the public. This time period had grown into an antiwar era, where people became disgusted with the veterans who participated in the war. Many Americans were filled with hatred and resentment of anything that had any relation to the war in Vietnam. American indifference toward returning soldiers was felt for decades, thus it is understandable that Vietnam Veterans of America vowed that “Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another” (“Vietnam Veterans”, 2017). Today, thanks to the support organizations founded for Vietnam veterans, soldiers returning home are recognized for their duty. They are recognized and honored by the media and are allowed privileges through private forms of assistance to help them lead as normal a life as possible with their families. The soldiers who lost their lives in Vietnam, as well as those who returned home, are the reason why troops returning from service today receive the respect that they deserve.

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