

America's Wars and Failures

by George Friedman - January 3, 2022

Sixty years ago, in 1962, the United States made the decision to go to war in Vietnam, deploying major ground and air forces to the battle for the first time. This was a fraction of the men and aircraft that would serve there over the years to come. It was a line that the Kennedy administration realized it was crossing. It saw U.S. involvement as a minor, even experimental, move. But when a nation sends its soldiers to war, a logic takes hold. As men die, the nation assumes it is for a vital interest. Leaders cannot declare the experiment a failure because they cannot admit they experimented with the lives of soldiers. A death requires a worthy reason, and establishing that the death was not in vain is incompatible with "cutting and running," in Lyndon B. Johnson's words. Intervention is difficult. Withdrawal under fire is agony.

To understand American strategy between 1962 and now, we have to understand what John F. Kennedy was seeing and thinking when he made the first major commitment. Kennedy was crafted by World War II, and the senior military men were as well. In World War II, America understood its enemy. Germany was ruled by Hitler, and Hitler and his subordinates were clever, ruthless and like us in that they fought a war of engines and industry. We understood that Hitler was an unprincipled tyrant. Japan was an empire ruled by a brutal government and, as we saw in China, merciless fighters. We also knew that like the Germans and Americans, they were fighting an industrial war. We knew the enemy, we never underestimated its strength, and we timed our war to coincide with industrial production. We knew the value of allies, the uses of aircraft carriers and tanks, and how to train men for war. We mastered this and more. And we would fight to the end, no quarter asked nor given.

The United States outstripped North Vietnam and the Viet Cong in every measure that won World War II. We did not realize that we didn't understand our enemy. They were not industrial, nor were they divided between communists and a range of factions. Clearly the non-communists in the south hated the tyranny of the north. The anti-communist population had to be mobilized and armed with the best equipment, and the U.S. flag, along with the Vietnamese, would fly over Hanoi. Crowds in the south would line the roads welcoming the Americans even if the United States didn't take Hanoi. The purpose of intelligence is to predict what others will do, and just as the CIA failed to understand the consequence of the Bay of Pigs, it didn't understand Vietnam. It, too, was stuck in World War II.

Vietnam was not the SS fighting against the Maquis (French Resistance fighters). Vietnam was divided by treaty, but it was one country. The communists had seized the north and the non-communists ruled the south. The non-communists came in many forms, but the one thing they shared with the communists in the north was that they were Vietnamese. They were not shocked by a repressive communist regime as much as by the thought of a Vietnamese civil war, which is what the Americans were selling, whether they called it that or not. They did not want to fight other Vietnamese. What they wanted was to be left alone. The Vietnamese did not see the Americans as liberators and protectors. They saw them as delivering the terrors of industrial war. After enduring French occupation and oppression by Vietnamese whom the French had elevated to puppet rulers, they were not going to choose between a new imperialism and a communist dictatorship. This did not mean that anti-communism wasn't present, nor that many did not view the Americans as a friendly force. It did mean that the passions of the Vietnamese were divided, complex and volatile.

The Americans made three mistakes. The first was that they thought that, as in Belgium, their arrival in Vietnam would be met with universal joy. They didn't know that because the leadership didn't listen to the intelligence.

Second, they did not understand the communist enemy. The communists drew much of their legitimacy from having driven the French out. Their communism and nationalism were bound up. This was also true of Mao's Chinese Communism and Stalin's Defend the Motherland speech. There are those who fight for abstract beliefs, but many more who fight for their homeland. I am not sure how many Americans in World War II fought for liberal democracy or America, but I suspect protection of the homeland resonated more. Vietnam had been ruled by many brutes, but the communists at least were Vietnamese brutes. They were understandable.

Finally, they fought the war from the standpoint of perception, particularly of the U.S. public's perception. Rather than do what was done in World War II, which was to make clear that this would be a long and bloody war and thus bind the public to the truth, the government sought to align strategy with the idea that victory was approaching and casualties would decline. This meant that the Tet Offensive shattered all trust. Lying hopefully works best when reality cooperates.

The U.S. did not understand its enemy or its friends. It feared the communists less than American public opinion. In wars, the darkest moment might be just before success. Think of the Battle of the Bulge. The darkest moment could not be a moment like this because preposterous claims of success had not prepared the American public for it.

When we think of not understanding one's enemy, of shaping a war to not upset the untruths of the conflict, and of trying to overwhelm through industrial warfare an enemy that is fighting a very different war, we can also think of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The enemy might or might not have hated the government, but enough people hated the Americans because they were not Iraqis or Afghans. Ideology and religion played a part but were not the key. A stranger was in their house, and they had to drive him out.

Americans should be aware of this, because our revolution was designed to drive out the haughty British, with their rules and regulations. The revolution was committed to the Declaration of Independence, but the real enemy was the Brits. They were a stranger in our house, and they had to be expelled. The moral principle is there, but men die for the love of their own.

There are few wars like World War I and II, thank God. Reasoning from how we won those conflicts is usually going to bring failure in other wars. The surge in American wars after World War II and their unsatisfactory outcomes should be a testament to this. Going to war and failing represents leadership without discernment, with irrational belief in one's own strength and foolish dismissal of the motivation and intelligence of the enemy. Even if many welcome us as liberators, it will be these factors that determine our fate. Fortunately for America, it is too wealthy and strong to be brought down by failure. But it's important not to push your luck.

Wars are necessary and will happen, but they should begin as World War II did: with fear and awe of your enemy. Anything else makes you careless. As Thucydides noted, war cannot be waged from a divided and frightened city. This proved true in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. The most important question was never asked: How would the United States benefit from victory, and what would defeat cost? Defeat was never imagined, and the benefit of success was vastly overrated. The world did not end, nor did American power. But fearing the consequences of defeat, we put the inevitable off. Today, the U.S. cooperates with Vietnam against China. What was unthinkable and unbearable then is neither today. Wars, therefore, should be rare and utterly necessary.

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