

Remembering Vietnam, But Why Do We Still Stumble Into Futile Wars?

by Louis René Beres (May 2015)

Now that more than forty years have passed since the fall of Saigon, it is high time to ask some truly basic questions. No single question could be more necessary than the utterly obvious query: *Why does the United States still get itself drawn into misconceived and losing wars?* To be sure, even now, this most primordial question must remain sensitive or even painful for many Americans. Still, the long-term costs of simply ignoring it further are apt to be intolerable and catastrophic.

Viscerally, at least, the likely answer doesn't seem to include a recurrently inept national leadership. After all, as an allegedly democratic society, it would seem that any pertinent leadership errors are more-or-less an accurate reflection of wider citizen views. Shouldn't we now be looking, therefore, at the adequacy of these underlying and clearly prior views?

If, thereafter, we should decide to indict a plutocracy that merely masquerades as representative government – actually, an increasingly popular assessment these days – there would be little good reason to point accusingly at “The American People.” In this case, instead, we should be forced to admit that the individual citizen typically remains little more than an unwitting object of elite manipulation, or what Bob Dylan might once have called a “pawn in their game.”

Significantly, a nuanced and complex difference of opinion on this set of issues had already emerged in this country's early history. Then, *contra* John Adams, Thomas Jefferson expressed an unambiguously basic confidence in popular sovereignty. Still, even for Jefferson, there were various strict, compelling, and distinctly binding rules to be followed, standards on who could and could not participate in national governance. For Jefferson, a viable democracy had always to be an *educated* democracy.

After the long-forgotten War of 1812, which remains reassuringly hidden away in our nation's “lost” column, the first genuinely-acknowledged American military failure was Vietnam. However we might prefer to analyze and characterize this glaringly conspicuous defeat, it was actually a recognizably lost war from the start. Expressed most succinctly, this suggests that Vietnam

never made a scintilla of either conceptual or common sense.

Not a scrap.

It began, we may recall, without pomp or circumstance, with the pleasingly clever metaphor of “containment” (remember LBJ’s “dominoes”?), and with assorted corollary promises to punish a presumed aggressor. From the start, North Vietnam and VCI (Vietcong Infrastructure) had presented a markedly convenient enemy, one that was unimaginably easy to loathe, and therefore one easy to kill.

The war began, even before the Gulf of Tonkin incident on August 2, 1964, with deliberately calculated American warnings to “halt Communist expansion.” Nonetheless, Vietnam was never intended to be an unending or protracted, war. No, the American generals, while seeing only a monolithic global adversary, had also read their Sun-Tzu, including even the ancient Chinese military theorist’s famously explicit condemnation of “long wars.”

Always, however, the simplistic metaphors from Washington muddled underlying strategic truth. South Vietnam was never really a falling “domino;” indeed, it was never even a separately sovereign state. From the start, U.S. policy-makers had paid absolutely no attention to the fully codified expectations of the 1954 Geneva Accords, the authoritative agreements for unifying elections that immediately followed the stunning French defeat at Dienbienphu.

As to the American *Order of Battle* that had been crafted for halting Communism in Southeast Asia, it never had a sliver of operational hope.

None at all.

Yes, at first, at least on Defense Secretary Robert McNamara’s then-persuasive chalkboards, “counter-insurgency warfare” had looked impressively tidy. But in its actual and incremental implementation, McNamara’s plan quickly became something else entirely, a vaporous victim of myriad and mutually reinforcing developments that were simply not supposed to happen. Later, a similarly ignominious fate was to await General David Petraeus’ “new and improved” iterations of *CIW* in Iraq and Afghanistan. Once again, recalling 19th century Prussian strategist, Carl von Clausewitz, the best-laid plans were to prove no match for “mass,” for “friction,” or for the ever-indeterminable “fog of war.”

When, personally, I first met McNamara back at Princeton, in the fall of 1967, it had seemed clear enough to me, then just a 22-year old Ph.D. student, that this Kennedy “whiz kid” lacked even the faintest intellectual or analytic understanding of the “Second Indochina War.” Also

obvious was that the conflict's principal architect was determined to proceed at all costs – so long, of course, as they would have to be borne entirely by others. Looking back, a half million young Americans went to Southeast Asia on McNamara's watch. More than 16,000 died in "McNamara's War;" another 42,000 were killed in the seven years following his personal tenure at Defense.

That was then. More recently, another manifestly futile American war was sustained in Iraq. Now a conflict that has formally ended (but only officially, at least for the United States), it nonetheless displays excruciatingly persistent levels of sectarian violence – levels that are substantially worse than anything that had taken place before the conflict's inauspicious start. In Afghanistan, too, the chaotic and basically incoherent struggles remain ongoing, even for us. Here, official terminations of belligerency bear absolutely no relation to distressingly palpable realities on the ground, including the expansive growth of ISIS, and the increasing probability of Jihadist terror attacks here at home.

Mustn't we now ask: *For what conceivably defensible reasons were these post-Vietnam wars fought in the first place?*

How could we possibly not ask this question?

Soon, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, all once residual oases of stability will regress to what seventeenth-century English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, would have called a *bellum omnes contra omnes*, "a war of all against all." In part, in these most incomprehensible and inhospitable lands, stability will unravel precisely because of our own misconceived interventions. To be sure, however, unlike Vietnam, the Afghanistan and Iraqi wars did make conceptual sense.

Unlike Vietnamese insurgents seeking national independence, Radical Islam is an authentic enemy. It does need to be countered. Facing the expanding *Jihadist* threat following 9/11, America has doubtlessly been engaged in what may still be called a "just war."

Here, however, the overriding problem has been operational or tactical.

These particular wars, although just in origin and coherent in concept, can never be won.

Over the years, with the now obvious exception of North Korea, America's doctrinal enemy has changed, from "Communism," to "Islamism" or "Jihadism." This time, our ideological adversary is thoroughly real, not merely resilient and formidable. Unlike the earlier war in Southeast Asia, a war North Vietnam and the Viet Cong preferred to identify as the "Second Indochina

War,” our current enemy is not just an exaggerated foe, one that has once again been crudely carved from an antecedent hodgepodge of metaphors, smoke, and utterly distorting mirrors.

Still, if any particular *Jihadist* enemy is seemingly vanquished or neutralized by our military forces in one country or another, it will likely re-group, re-configure, and subsequently reappear elsewhere. After Iraq, after Afghanistan, we Americans will be facing resurgent adversaries in such persistently unmanageable venues as Syria, Sudan, Mali, Nigeria, Yemen, Somalia, Egypt, and “Palestine.” By failing to recognize that the Palestinian Authority and Hamas are ultimately as dangerous to the United States as ISIS and al-Qaeda, the Obama administration is encouraging the corrosive delusion of a democratic and peaceful Palestinian state.

Recent recognition of “Palestine” by the Vatican ignored altogether that the Palestinian Authority seeks only a One State Solution for itself and Israel, and that this state is not a Jewish one. To wit, on PA maps of the region, all of Israel proper is identified as “Occupied Palestine.”

What would Thomas Jefferson have thought of American political judgments on national war making? Plainly, perhaps among other interrelated sentiments, Jefferson would have recognized the evident warning symptoms of a declining democracy, a system of governance now operating here without benefit of any meaningfully discernible intellect or virtue.

“When the throne sits on mud,” observed the nineteenth-century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, *“mud sits on the throne.”* To be fair, this harsh judgment about democracy is not really all that different from Jefferson’s. It’s just more patently unvarnished; it is only more glaringly stark.

The Founding Fathers generally believed, with Edmund Randolph, that prevailing societal evils originated in “the turbulence and follies of democracy,” and, with Roger Sherman, that “the people should have as little to do as may be about the government.”

Sometimes, in such matters, truth is counterintuitive. The Founding Fathers deeply believed that true liberty could only be menaced by democracy. For them, such liberty would have to be secured not by democratic governance, but rather by a predictably expansive regard for private property.

In the 1950s, Harvard historian Perry Miller published a book titled *The Life of the Mind in America*. Then, thoughtful references to a vital national literary tradition rooted primarily in Emerson, Thoreau, and the American Transcendentalists, were instantly recognizable, even to

the average citizen reader. Not today.

Now, any work offered with a similar title would need to be very brief. More than likely, because few Americans are willing to challenge themselves beyond the demeaning genres of Hollywood movies, supermarket literature, and habitual social networking, *The Life of the Mind in America* would have to be listed, *sotto voce*, as an indisputably grim satire.

In the end, our national willingness to avoid futile wars will require long neglected forms of wisdom. Before any American president can be expected to avoid yet another series of staggering military defeats, he or she will first need to be guided by an electorate that is finally willing to take itself seriously. This, in turn, will require a population that can earnestly resuscitate Ralph Waldo Emerson's earlier admonition to combine "plain living and high thinking."

Most Americans will have no problem with "plain living" (they simply have no choice, as millions can barely pay even their monthly bills), but very few (including the wealthiest among us) will be able to meet the indispensably corollary demands of "high thinking." Still, by definition, until these core criteria of a serious democracy can be satisfied, our leaders will continue to be selected and guided by an electorate that is determinedly hostile to truth. It follows that before we can ever hope to combat the tangible dangers of *Jihad*, the American "throne" will first have to be situated upon much more substantial citizen foundations.

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