

# Che Guevara's Revenge

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Twenty years ago, after the victory of the United States and its allies in the war to evict Iraq from Kuwait, President George H. W. Bush exulted that "we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all."

That triumphalism now appears misguided. Americans are drained by years of conflict in foreign wars and an economic crisis that is the worst in decades. Understandably, they want to bring the troops home and focus on domestic needs.

This change in attitude has provoked warnings that the United States is abandoning its international responsibilities. "We cannot repeat the lessons of the 1930s when the United States of America stood by while bad things happened in the world," Senator John McCain has warned.

Senator McCain expresses a view that has dominated the American foreign policy establishment since the Second World War. It is the argument that led to the American involvement in Vietnam, a war in which he served with distinction.

But despite his service, and that of many other Americans, we lost the war. That defeat was unimaginable in 1964, when Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution with only two dissenting votes.

The trauma of the war has loomed over subsequent American engagements abroad. American policy has swung between the poles of Munich and Vietnam.

It is a debate that hinges on two issues.

The first is the issue of whether peace is indivisible. Those who focus on Munich stress that failure to confront Hitler early did not avoid war, but rather led to a much larger conflict. Those who look to Vietnam point out that the consequences of the American loss in Vietnam were short-lived and local, and however tragic in the region, did not prevent the Western triumph in the Cold War just 15 years later.

The second argument, which is derived from the first, is that South Vietnam was a test of our credibility. By fulfilling our commitment to it as the guarantor power of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, we were demonstrating the risks other aggressors would take in confronting our allies. In this way, we hoped to prevent other, possibly more deadly and threatening conflicts.

But in order for this theory to work, you not only have to win, but win cheaply. If you win, but you are gasping as you finish, you are not likely to convince other aggressors of your willingness or ability to fulfill other commitments. Far from enhancing your credibility, you will have undermined it.

This point was picked up by our enemies. "How close we could look into a bright future should two, three or many Vietnams flourish throughout the world with their share of deaths and their immense tragedies," Che Guevara argued.

Fortunately, Che's vision was not realized, but his logic challenges the assumption behind deterrence. If the demonstration of our power does not inspire fear and awe, if it is instead seen as an opportunity to put additional pressure on us, we are not preserving peace but walking into a trap.

If one believes in the success of the surge in Iraq and Afghanistan, one has to ask why Gaddafi was not deterred by the prospect of war with NATO. If aggressors are not impressed by our power, we have to question the relevance of the Munich precedent.

It is not isolationist to recognize that we do not have infinite resources. If even victory does not create awe of American power, then our situation is untenable. If we actually have to fulfill all our commitments, we will exhaust ourselves. No country can be expected to fight two, three, many Vietnams simultaneously, and we certainly cannot do it now.

That was Che Guevara's hope. It would be the ultimate irony if we fulfilled his vision.

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