

SEARCH

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## Getting the Vietnam Analogy Right in Afghanistan

The ghosts of the Vietnam War seem to be hanging around the White House Situation Room as President Barack Obama and his national security aides are debating a new strategy for the war in Afghanistan, and in particular whether to deploy more U.S. troops to that country. Indeed, if to judge by their required reading list, Vietnam is very much on the minds of President Obama and other officials, lawmakers and pundits in Washington.

The headline above a recent report in The Wall Street Journal, "Behind the War Debate, a Battle of Two Books Rages," seem to illustrate the way supporters and opponents of increasing U.S. troop level in Afghanistan have been making use of what they see as the lessons of Vietnam, and applying them to the debates over the process of presidential national security policymaking and civilian-military relationship.

Hence, political scientist Gordon Goldstein's *Lessons in Disaster* which depicts a President Lyndon Johnson being pressed to escalate the war in Vietnam by a somewhat narrow-minded military is being cited by those skeptical about the recommendation by General Stanley McChrystal, the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, to increase the number of troops there.

At the same time, military analyst Lewis Sorley's *A Better War*, which describes the administration of President Richard Nixon under public and Congressional pressure to get out of Vietnam and rejecting what could have become an effective counter-insurgency strategy by the military, is being touted by those who leaning in the direction of General McChrystal's recommendations.

Applying historical analogies à la "the lessons of..." to contemporary foreign policy dilemmas could certainly be instructive. As President Obama prepares to make his decisions in Afghanistan, he should consider the pitfalls faced by U.S. presidents, starting with John Kennedy as they tried to calibrate U.S. strategic choices in Vietnam by drawing on the input of their military and civilian advisors and juggling conflicting political pressures from the public, Congress and the bureaucracy.

But the historical analogies of Vietnam could become confusing if not misleading when one shifts the focus from the decision making processes to ideological premises of U.S. involvement the Cold War. In fact, Obama and his advisors should recall that as President Johnson and the members of his national security team were deliberating whether to expand U.S. military intervention in Southeast Asia, it was the specter Munich 1938 that was haunting Washington then, and that the lessons of British attempts to appease Nazi Germany's dictator Adolph Hitler were being employed in a way that seemed to be leaving the White House with no other choice but to hang tough and stay the course in Vietnam lest

U.S. policymakers would be perceived as lacking the resolve to stand-up to Hitler-like aggressors.

The reason that the lessons of Munich in the context of World War II seemed to be so relevant to U.S. policymakers during the Vietnam War taking place at the height of the Cold War was that American intervention in the two wars were driven by grand Manichean narratives in which a U.S.-led Western alliance was confronting a powerful global aggressor representing a threatening and dynamic ideology.

Indeed, for the American foreign policy establishment as well as for the general public, North Vietnam was perceived to be an integral part of a monolithic Communist bloc led by the Soviet Union, including its Eastern European satellites, China and Cuba. The only serious debate in Washington was over the kind of mix of diplomacy and military force that the U.S. needed to employ in defending South Vietnam and confronting North Vietnam. And in that context, it wasn't difficult for the "hawks" in Washington to suggest that just like Czechoslovakia in 1938, South Vietnam was being threatened by a regional satellite of an antagonistic global adversary and thus required forceful American military support.

Recognizing that nationalism and not adherence to communist ideology or solidarity with the Soviet Union and China was the main driving force behind North Vietnamese policy could have changed the strategic calculations of policymakers in Washington. Indeed, the growing realization that there was no Soviet-led global communist bloc led to the U.S. opening to China -- which ended-up going to war against Vietnam -- and to the use of the "China Card" in dealing with the Soviet Union. And it helped accelerate U.S. détente with the Soviet Union as well West German rapprochement with Eastern Europe or "Ostpolitik."

In the aftermath of 9/11 and in the period leading to the war in Afghanistan and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it seemed for a while as though President George W. Bush and his neoconservative advisors would be successful in constructing a new grand Manichean narrative that conceived of a U.S.-led West confronting a global Islamofascist threat or a Caliphate-in-the-making that allegedly included Al Qaeda, a radical Muslim-Sunni fundamentalist terrorist group; Taliban, an Afghani-Pashtun and Sunni-fundamentalist movement allied with U.S. partners, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan; Iran, a Muslim-Shiite fundamentalist state and Hizbollah, a Lebanese-Arab Shiite movement as well as the secular Syrian Ba'ath regime and the Palestinian-Sunni Hamas movement, elected to power in a U.S.-sponsored election and a mish-mash of national and regional militant Muslim groups -- in the Horn of Africa and North Africa, and in places like Chechnya (Russia), Kashmir (India), and Xinjiang (China).

In a way, it was the costly and failed Iraq War that helped disprove the Islamofascist myth -- after all, the collapse of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban helped strengthen Iran -- and undermine the ideological premises of short-lived grand narrative that steered the U.S. into the war in Mesopotamia while preventing it from achieving its original and limited goals in Afghanistan (destroying Al Qaeda). Indeed, any serious discussion of the political realities in the Greater Middle East taking place in Washington today would have to assume that the U.S. has to deal today -- including in Afghanistan -- not with a unified and monolithic adversary or "axis" but with a hodgepodge of Muslim governments and movements that lack any shared ideology or common interests.

To apply the historical analogies here, the choices facing the U.S. in Afghanistan are unlike the dilemmas the U.S. confronted during the Vietnam War, in the same way that the "loss" of South Vietnam wasn't akin to the destruction of Czechoslovakia by Hitler's Germany. Even under a scenario under which the Taliban ends up controlling even more territory than it already does today, the impact on core U.S. national interest would be limited. Local and regional players (India, Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) would be forced to work together or separately to prevent the country from becoming a source of instability and a center of international terrorism. Hence, taking limited steps towards securing U.S. narrow goals of preventing Al Qaeda from using Afghanistan as a military base should not be regarded as a new and dramatic chapter in a grand narrative but as a cost-effective exercise in fighting terrorism.

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