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REVIEW ESSAYS

Misunderstanding Vietnam

Richard Megargee

Record, Jeffrey. *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998. 256pp. \$27.95

JEFFREY RECORD HAS SYNTHESIZED the vast body of Vietnam war literature into a concise analysis of why the United States lost in Vietnam, who was responsible, and whether defeat was avoidable.

Record lists five major causes for the American defeat. The first was the U.S. government's misunderstanding of the nature and significance of the war for both America and Vietnam. A succession of American administrations failed (in what Clausewitz describes as "the first, the supreme" act of strategic judgment) to "establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its true nature." The conflict in Vietnam was regarded by the United States as an external aggression undertaken by agents of a monolithic Communist conspiracy ultimately bent on global domination. This "worst case" scenario stemmed from setbacks in the Cold War, such as fear of third-world vulnerability to wars of national liberation and expectations of a domino effect from any further defections in Southeast Asia. These concerns were heightened by the prospect of a domestic political backlash following another retreat in Asia.

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Decision makers thus saw the challenge as a test of American determination and commitment far beyond the import of Vietnam itself. A vigorous response presented an opportunity to stop additional Communist encroachment, thwart Chinese imperialism, honor U.S. defense commitments, defeat wars of national liberation, sustain emergent democracies, and avoid a possible Munich. However, Record claims that this attitude overlooked factors of Indochinese history such as Chinese-Vietnamese hostility and the internal, nationalist character of the conflict; it discounted the disadvantages of the political and geographic environment and the allies' indifference; and it ignored the absence of vital American interests. This erroneous interpretation of the situation led the United States to conduct the conflict not as a counterinsurgency but as a conventional war fought along lines most congenial to American military doctrine and forces.

The author attributes as the second cause for defeat the underestimation by the United States of the enemy's tenacity and capability, combined with an overestimation of its own political will and capacity to influence the war. From their perspective, the Communists were fighting a war of total effort and objective, seeking national unification and revolutionary transformation of Vietnamese society. (Over the eight years of the First Indochinese War, the Communists had displayed outstanding organizational skills, leadership, and discipline, as well as a willingness to sustain enormous sacrifices.) Like for the French, for the U.S. the war was limited in effort and objectives. Thus with only marginal security interests, the U.S. government had no intention of risking war with China or disrupting domestic social and economic goals in order to defend an artificial creation of the 1954 Geneva Conference. American commitment, or lack thereof, was evident by tentative application of military power, restricting the scope and areas of military activity, and refusing to disturb domestic society by mobilizing reserve units, increasing taxes, or awakening the public to the magnitude of the war. The disparity in commitment was apparently to be overcome by the nobility of the cause, America's overwhelming military power, and the

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application of new techniques of nation building to achieve a viable South Vietnamese government. Unfortunately, the last goal was vitiating by the inability of the United States to control that government and save it from its own incompetence. While the United States focused on the tangible indices of military power (body counts, sortie numbers, munition tonnages, etc.) to crush its enemy, the Communists maintained superiority in the intangibles of discipline, initiative, endurance, and sacrifice, seeking to break the will of the American public without having to defeat its forces in the field.

These initial errors of judgment were compounded by the inappropriate strategies with which the United States conducted the ground war in the South. Herein lies Record's third cause of failure. Having identified the problem as external aggression, the United States undertook the strategy of attrition of invading forces, using massive search and destroy operations, which would compel the enemy's surrender by destroying troops faster than they could be replaced. That strategy, Record believes, was unsuited to the political and geographical environment, or to counter a strategy of protracted guerrilla operations aimed at political and psychological goals rather than destruction of armed forces. The Americans' assumptions that they could identify the enemy, initiate combat, control the tempo of operations, quantify enemy casualties, and achieve a break point of losses over replacements all proved illusory. The excessive use of firepower was counterproductive, producing only indiscriminate damage and exacerbating antigovernment sentiment. It did not force the Viet Cong or the People's Army of Vietnam to fight and die on conventional terms, much less reach a breaking point. These miscalculations were accompanied by the "Americanization" of the war, which meant that the United States assumed responsibility for the entire war effort, equipping and training the Army of the Republic of Vietnam to fight in the American mode but without imposing control over it in the field. The result further diverted effort and attention away from the insurgency problem, leaving it to the South Vietnamese government or to no one. So the United States proceeded with a strategy and tactics that had proven successful in its last three wars, regardless of their irrelevance in this war; they were the only ones the military was prepared (or motivated) to use.

As for the war against the North, Record paints a similar picture of failure resulting from inappropriate strategy—in this case the air

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war. Prosecuted almost independently from the conflict in the South, the air war involved bombing North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Its initial objectives were to stave off defeat in the South, boost Saigon's morale, and obviate the need for extensive ground forces. Air operations were later escalated to interdict infiltration to the South and coerce Hanoi into stopping its intervention by showing U.S. resolve and capability to inflict intolerable damage on the North. Once again U.S. reasoning proved fallacious. The effect only hardened North Vietnamese commitment, increased escalation, and elicited greater reliance on Chinese and Soviet assistance. The campaign also discredited the United States abroad, consumed enormous material and human resources, and in the process gave Hanoi an exploitable prisoner of war issue. Ground forces were still indispensable to retard the collapse of the South Vietnamese government; infiltration was never seriously impeded; and the Communists were never forced to negotiate. Record agrees that gradualism, micro-management, and target restrictions vitiated the impact of airpower, but he claims that divided command, confused goals, and service rivalry were equally damaging. He believes that early massive attacks on the North would have had no more impact on the insurgency in the South than did the sustained ROLLING THUNDER campaign. Such later operations as LINEBACKER I and II did not demonstrate the coercive capability of massive airpower in a war already lost and would have been politically, diplomatically, and morally unsustainable.

The fourth reason given for America's failure in Vietnam is its commitment to a client who for over twenty years was incapable of establishing a viable alternative to Communist rule, governing or fighting with a modicum of efficiency, or inspiring the loyalty and sacrifice of the Vietnamese people. Under these circumstances, no American strategy could have guaranteed the survival of an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam. The failure of the United States came initially from giving this problem insufficient attention. After accepting the deposition of the Diem regime and implicitly assuming responsibility for the conduct of the war, the United States did not insist upon the necessary reforms for effective rule and military operations. Unable to cure the country's social and economic problems, the United States concentrated on the military, arming and training the South Vietnamese army in its own image. However, despite years of advice and support from America, the South

Vietnamese army shared the incapacity of its parent government. It was never able to stand up to the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese army, which is not surprising given its elitist, venal, incompetent officer corps, and its demoralized, despised, ill-trained, and corrupt troops. Could the U.S. assumption of civil and military authority have made a difference? Record thinks not. The dissolution of the society was too far advanced, and the fear of a neocolonial mantle would have only increased opposition at home and abroad. So the war evolved into a struggle not between contending Vietnamese factions but between a nationalistic communist movement and the United States, with its wholly dependent local surrogate.

Record attributes the final source of failure in Vietnam to the effects of bitter civil-military antagonism over the conduct of the war. In his exploration of this subject he attempts to assess overall responsibility for the disastrous outcome. Disagreements were not over constitutional prerogatives as in the past wars (the military never challenged the primacy of civilian policy makers) but over how the war should be fought. Record argues that the disagreements made it impossible to pursue a coherent strategy. The U.S. military never supported the administration's gradualist, limited-war strategy. Chafed by the proscription on ground operations in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam, as well as restrictions on bombing targets in the North, it never accepted the refusal by successive administrations to mobilize reserve units or to upset public opinion. Military leaders felt consigned to the role of not losing rather than of winning. On the other hand, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were openly contemptuous of the military professionals. Both presidents intruded into the military realm by attempting to micro-manage operations for signaling and negotiation purposes rather than seeking decisive military objectives; they excluded military leaders from the highest policy councils. These divisions impeded both the coherent formulation and implementation of any strategy.

Record places primary responsibility for the overall failure in Vietnam on civilian leaders. As the duly constituted authorities, they clearly bore principal responsibility for their failures to understand the true nature of the conflict and its significance to vital U.S. interests, and to estimate correctly the viability of South Vietnam. They were also complicit in the flawed ground and air strategies, as well as the civil-military divisions. Record harshly condemns both

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Democratic presidents and their principal advisors for their lack of moral courage either to withdraw from an intervention they doubted to be feasible or wise, or to alert the public to its potential magnitude.

However, Record believes the military to be only slightly less culpable. He criticizes it for failing to support the approved strategy or to recommend a more viable one; for not creating a unified Southeast Asia Command, much less a combined U.S.–South Vietnamese command; for ruinous rotation policies; for profligate logistic support and base facilities; for excessive use of firepower; and for chronic inability to transcend service rivalries. Record finds no greater moral courage among the senior military leaders than he did among civilians. They continued to serve politicians who were contemptuous of them and who imposed fatally flawed policies and strategies. They never once advised the president or secretary of defense that their strategies would probably fail. The military never contemplated withdrawal, only the application of more force.

In his final chapter, Record concludes that the causes of failure may be irrelevant, because an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam was unattainable—no decisive military effort would have been morally or politically acceptable to the American people. He sees no evidence to support the theory that if the military had been granted greater latitude a political victory would have been achieved. Its formula to mine North Vietnam's deepwater ports and inland waterways, bomb all militarily significant targets and lines of communication inside the Democratic Republic, and inject ground forces into Laos and Cambodia to disrupt Communist base areas and interdict communications, might have indefinitely denied the Communists an ability to take over the South forcibly. But this was no war-winning strategy to establish a self-sustaining South Vietnamese government. It would only have widened the war, required more troops, and risked external escalation without addressing the insurgency problem or inducing Hanoi to abandon its effort to reunify the country. It also ignored the limits to America's willingness to support an indecisive and indefinite military intervention.

On the other hand, the author also does not see how more restrained alternatives would have helped the cause. An enclave or population protection strategy would have ceded initiative to the enemy and resulted in protraction best suited to the Communists' objectives. The locally successful Marine and CIA pacification strategies, which

indeed were directed at the key problem, were not viable on a wide scale, and the U.S. Army was neither doctrinally nor structurally capable of undertaking such a strategy nationwide, especially without the necessary commitment and capability of local government forces.

Record is even more critical of such radical alternatives (especially popular among later critics of the war) as invasion of the North and saturation bombing. Invading the North might have forced the North Vietnamese army out of the South and given Saigon time to establish a responsible government. However, it would have risked escalating the war, inspiring even greater North Vietnamese commitment, prompting countermeasures by China or the Soviet Union, and requiring mobilization of the American economy and its society. Moreover, it would have expanded the objective of the war from a limited one to the overthrow of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the unification of Indochina, objectives far beyond America's original goals. As for massive bombing of the North, there is little evidence that such a campaign against population centers, food supplies, and dikes would have been decisive in either forcing Hanoi's capitulation or interdicting aid to the South. However, it clearly would have been politically, morally, and diplomatically unacceptable and out of all proportion to the limited nature of the war. So the United States lacked any decisive war-winning options, and those that were proposed were irrelevant to the gravest of all problems, the total incapacity of Saigon. The best that could be hoped was to deny the Communists victory by permanent Americanization of the war and Saigon. As was said of another U.S. limited war, it was "the wrong war, at the wrong time, in the wrong place."

This reviewer can claim no deep knowledge of the Vietnam War, either from first-hand experience or from specialized study. His familiarity with the subject and its literature comes from twenty-six years of teaching seminars on policy and strategy to senior officers at the Naval War College; these classes included case studies on Vietnam (at least for the past nineteen years, the subject being too sensitive for inclusion in the curriculum prior to that). From that perspective, Record's catalog of failures did not offer many surprises, since most of them are at least prefigured, if not expressly stated, in the works of G. C. Herring, G. M. Kahin, A. F. Krepinevich, M. Clodfelter, and E. M. Bergerud, among others. The virtue of this work lies not in its revelations about the failures of the war (which

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Record concedes are generally known) but in the strength of its chapters condemning both civilian and military leadership, and making clear the unwinnable nature of the struggle. Despite some redundant material, this book has clearly and concisely identified the shortcomings of the American political and military system, revealed by one of the greatest tragedies in U.S. history.

This work surely will not be the last word on the subject, but it is among the most persuasive critiques to date.

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