

Research

VIETNAM WAR: Why the American Lost in Vietnam War

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Abstract: Vietnam War is thought to be the best-known military conflict after the World War II. This is because of the US's far-reaching involvement in the war during the 1960s. The Vietnam War originated from the Vietnamese struggle to liberate the country off the French colonization. The United States kept supporting France and by 1954, the Americans were covering approximately 80 per cent of the cost of the French campaign. With fear of the so-called 'domino theory' combined with the already massive cost, the United States, under Eisenhower administration, did not accept the unified Vietnam ruled by the DRV and began to involve more in the conflict in Indochina. At the end of the story, it was the United States who lost in the war in Vietnam. In this context, it might be questionable how a powerful country like the United States, that defeated the powerful Japanese and ended the World War II, lost in war against a poorly-equipped Vietnam. Therefore, this paper is intended to point out the relevant factors that contribute to the defeat of the United States in Vietnam War.

Keywords: Vietnam War, Vietnam, the United States, factors

Introduction

Vietnam War is thought to be the best-known military conflict after the World War II. This is because of the US's far-reaching involvement in the war during the 1960s. The interrelationship between the decolonization of European empires—here refers to France—and the rise of communism in Asia almost unavoidably made Indochina a subject of American interest as well as the Soviets and the Chinese. The Vietnam War originated from the Vietnamese struggle to liberate the country of the French colonization. The nationalist and communist Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence from France, in which Ho borrowed much of the declaration from the 1776 American Declaration of Independence, and formed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam

(DRV) on 2 September 1945, following the defeat of Japan in the WWII. Yet, the United States, under President Franklin Roosevelt administration, supported France's attempts to regain control over Indochina—a crucial source of raw materials for recovery of France's economic and political stability—since France was a key West European ally throughout the late 1940s. French control over Indochina resumed, however, Viet Minh never accepted it. The United States kept supporting France and by 1954, the Americans were covering approximately 80 per cent of the cost of the French campaign. With fear of the so-called 'domino theory' combined with the already massive cost, the United States, under Eisenhower administration, did not accept the unified Vietnam ruled by the DRV and began to involve more in the conflict in Indochina [1].

At the end of the story, it was the United States who lost the war in Vietnam. Notably, at the end of the war (1975), the US lost 58,000 lives and had spent approximately \$155 billion in South-East Asia since 1950. An additional \$200 billion would be paid in subsequent decades to those Americans (approximately 2 million) who had returned home alive and civil unrest in the United States while as many as half a million South Vietnamese civilians were killed, hundreds of thousands suffered injuries, and more than 5 million (out of a population of 16–17 million) became refugees. The combined (National Liberation Front–NLF) and North Vietnamese military losses ran up to half a million and the number of North Vietnamese civilian casualties is still unknown [2]. It is well documented that the United States lost in Vietnam War, but is it true? And if the United States really lost in Vietnam War, how? The United States, at that time, was one of the most powerful countries and also the one who made Japan sign a treaty to end World War II. American military capacity was a lot more powerful than that of Vietnam and even economically stronger. How could the United States lose in this war?

It is hard to believe that the United States is defeated in the war by any countries, particularly Vietnam, after the Second World War. The single most important factor determining the outcome of the war was probably the local and regional context: the North Vietnamese and their southern allies represented anti-colonialism and independence while the South Vietnamese were, not entirely incorrectly, often viewed as serving the interests of the latest 'colonizer', the United States [3]. However, no clear information or details on why Washington decided to end the war in 1975. This paper, therefore, frames what really contributed to American defeat in Vietnam War by analyzing the internal and external context.

Why the American Lost in Vietnam War

1/ Internal Factors

In internal context, United States, it became a pressure from both the American politicians and people to consider stopping waging war in Vietnam as by late 1967 the war already claimed about 30,000 Americans lives and casualties. At the same time, the war cost and its impact on domestic priorities also influence the American leadership to end the war.

American Politicians and People

Not everyone in the United States supported war in Vietnam. Although Nixon had made a personal promise to provide continuous support to South Vietnam with air power and military aid, the Congress passed a number of resolutions that decreased the presidential war-making capabilities. The War Powers Act of June 1973 set strict limits on a period of time the president could keep American troops abroad without approval of Congress. Nixon also could not prevent the cuts in military aid to South Vietnam that Congress insisted upon. In November 1974, Congress cut in half the Ford administration's proposed military aid budget for South Vietnam in 1975 from \$1.5 billion to \$700 million. Several prominent American politicians, such as the Democratic Senator Eugene McCarthy, were calling for a gradual American withdrawal.

During the mid-1960s, President Johnson and his administration were also shaken by growing American antagonism to the war on moral grounds. Most Americans supported Johnson's decision about sending combat troops to Vietnam in March 1965, yet this support faded since the U.S. casualties (dead and wounded soldiers) mounted and Americans learned more about the war. Instead, organized protests against American involvement in Vietnam erupted all across the country in 1966 and 1967. The anti-war movement was especially strong on college campuses, where student activists accused that the United States was waging an immoral and horribly destructive war against the Vietnamese people. The opposition to the war increased across the country and made greater numbers of political leaders began questioning U.S. policy as well. They no longer trusted the administration's claims that victory was within reach. Instead, they began to feel that the United States was sacrificing thousands of young men to a war that looked to them like a bloody and wasteful stalemate. The Vietnam War divided the American people more than any other event since the American Civil War (1861–65) because in the early years of U.S.

involvement, most people supported the government's policies. However, as the war dragged on and more American soldiers were killed or wounded, increasing numbers of Americans began to oppose the war [5].

A majority of American citizens also began to question the country's involvement in Vietnam during this time. The dissatisfaction could be seen at the anti-war rallies and protests, which became more frequent and involved larger numbers of people. In April 1967, 130,000 people attended the Spring Mobilization anti-war demonstration in New York City, and another 70,000 participated in related events in San Francisco. As the anti-war movement gained strength, the media increased its coverage of protests and other events and, as a result, the movement became more visible and influential. One of the largest anti-war demonstrations, known as the March on the Pentagon, took place in Washington, D.C., in October 1967 with more than a hundred thousand people marching through the streets of the city and became a huge media event. The March on the Pentagon showed the world that opposition to the Vietnam War was growing in the United States. By the late 1960s, polls showed that the majority of Americans opposed the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam [6].

War Cost

In the end, such efforts proved not only costly but counter-productive, for ironically the United States lost much of its international prestige in its misguided effort to preserve its credibility as an ally. The cost of American involvement in Vietnam War had a profound impact on US willingness to send its ground troops into far-away military conflicts—at least until the end of the Cold War. Economically, the war had been costly to all participants, but since 1950 the United States had spent around \$155 billion in South-East Asia; an additional \$200 billion would be paid in subsequent decades to those Americans (approximately two million) who had returned home alive. The war had also fueled inflation at home and become the focal point of civil unrest in the United States [7]. The sheer cost of the war was also a big contribution to growing American government deficits and weakened its relative position vis-à-vis its major economic competitors. At home in the United States, Johnson's ambitious social and economic programs, collectively known as the Great Society did not succeed since the large proportion of budget was spent on massive military spending in Vietnam. Thus, despite his efforts in 1965 to play down the conflict in order to defend his domestic priorities, in the end his desire to fight against poverty at home was sacrificed to what

he once referred to as ‘that bitch of a war’ on the other side of the world. The war had also fueled inflation at home and become the focal point of civil unrest in the United States. In addition to economic impact, by late 1967 the war already claimed about 30,000 Americans lives and the number increased to 58,000 lives at the end of the war [8].

2/ External Factors

There are three external factors, not those rooted the United States, that are likely to influence the Americans decision making to end the war.

Geography and frustrating enemy

By the mid-1960s, America had come through two world wars and the Korean War, in which the U.S. military was particularly well-equipped. In addition, nearly all the weapons of the previous wars had been modernized and replaced by better, faster, and more reliable ones. However, this U.S. military advancement would bog down in the jungles of Vietnam since this country was a jungle nation. This Vietnam-favorable factor made it hard for the U.S. troops to mobilize their armor and the airplanes would never see their targets under the canopy of trees. Also, the Viet Cong and NVA troops were elusive. They were people army, having no ground and no fixed positions to take, that could attack and disappear back into the wilderness or hide among rural villagers. They moved freely in front of and behind the U.S. military lines. Initially, American commitment to the ground war was minimal compared to that of the Viet Cong. Even General William C. Westmoreland, commander of the U.S. troops in Vietnam, also felt that full commitment could win the war, but he was bound to fight with restrictions under Johnson’s order [9].

The American forces remained struggled in other aspects of the war. They failed to cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail which is the key route the Communists used to transport soldiers and supplies to enter South Vietnam. This trail ran through the thick jungles of its neighboring countries—Laos and Cambodia—located on the west of Vietnam. To shut down this trail, American planes, from 1965 to 1968, bombed the trail every day, using sophisticated detection devices and spy reports to find their targets. Even so, the Communists continuously used the route, and repaired as needed. This network of wilderness routes grew to 2,000 km (12,500 miles) and much of it was paved for

truck traffic. In addition, the U.S. forces got frustrated with the way their enemy waged war. Tactically, the American soldiers were to engage the Viet Cong and NVA forces in open battle, where they could take full advantage of their superiority in firepower and mobility. For the most part, however, the Communists avoided open confrontation with the U.S. forces. Instead, they used the so-called “Guerrilla Warfare” against the American soldiers. This style of fighting irritated and discouraged American ground soldiers and general alike. The Americans also found it hard to eliminate Viet Cong forces from rural area permanently. The U.S. forces constantly chased the enemy out of villages or strategic jungle areas. The U.S heavily used the ground troops in these efforts, yet their superior weapon was air power [10].

The Presence of the Chinese and the Soviets

The Chinese and the Soviets’ relations with Vietnam were also a reason the United States decided not to launch an all-out assault on North Vietnam. The American leadership believed that if they launched the all-out assault on Hanoi, it would risk the Chinese or the Soviet entry into the conflict since Indochina, in the context of the Cold War, was subject of not only American interest, but also the Chinese and the Soviets.

In the case of China, scholars have long assumed that Beijing played an important role in supporting Hanoi’s efforts to fight the United States. In summer 1958, the Vietnamese Politburo formally asked Beijing’s advice about the strategies of the “Southern revolution”. The leadership emphasized that the most fundamental, most important and most urgent task” facing the Vietnamese revolution was “how to promote socialist revolution and reconstruction in the North.” China, on Hanoi’s request, offered substantial military aid to Vietnam before 1963. From 1956 to 1963, China’s military aid to Vietnam was 320 million Yuan. China’s arms shipments to Vietnam included 270,000 guns, over 10,000 piece of artillery, 200 million bullets of different types, 2.02 million artillery shells, 15,000 wire transmitters, 5,000 radio transmitters, roughly 1,000 trucks, 15 planes, 28 naval vessels, and 1.18 million sets of military uniforms. Beijing’s policy towards Vietnam began to be more radical in late 1962 and early 1963. Beijing extended its security commitments to Hanoi in 1964. Reported the possibility of escalation of military conflicts in the South and the United States might use air or/and land forces to attack the North, the Chinese offered to equip an additional 230 battalions for the Vietnamese [11]. The Chinese aids and assistance to Hanoi could be interpreted by the U.S. as Chinese’s support to the Communist Vietnam. In addition,

when policy makers in Washington decided to send more troops to South Vietnam and began operation “Rolling Thunder” in 1965, Beijing’s leaders had decided on three basic principles in formulating China’s strategy. First, if the Americans went beyond the bombing of the North and used land forces to invade North Vietnam, China would have to send military forces. Second, China would give clear warnings to the Americans, so that they would not feel free to expand military operations into the North. Third, China would avoid direct military confrontation with the United States as long as possible, but it would not shrink from a confrontation if necessary [12]. Regarding these principles, the United States was well aware of the possibilities China would enter the conflict.

For the Soviet, during the Tonkin Gulf incidents, the Soviet leadership had to decide either to abandon the DRV and to occupy a position of non-involvement in Indochina or to plunge into direct involvement and confrontation with the United States in alliance with North Vietnam. Both choices seemed unacceptable to Kremlin [13]. The former would undermine the Soviet position in the world communist movement and vis-à-vis Moscow’s allies, while the latter may increase radically the hostilities of the cold war and the confrontation of nuclear war. The Soviets therefore decided to choose a middle way by providing its North Vietnamese allies with necessary aid, but at the same time to put more efforts to find a diplomatic solution of the conflict in Vietnam. This policy was taking shape in December 1964 and emerged in its final forms during the first period of the US escalation of its involvement in the conflict in 1965, remained unchanged throughout the war in Vietnam. Following a number of agreements between the USSR and the DRV, Moscow provided North Vietnam with substantial and ever growing aid, and gradually became a principle DRV supplier [14]. Soviet-DRV military cooperation played a decisive role in Hanoi’s plans for the war against the United States and its Saigon allies. According to a memorandum prepared by the US Department of State Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the Soviet Union, in 1965, radically increased its military support to the DRV. In 1966-7 Moscow assumed an obligation to deliver 500 million rubles’ worth of equipment for the North Vietnamese armed forces (approximately \$550.5 million), and to reach a limit of 1 billion rubles for the military shipments since the beginning of 1953. However, the Soviets, in reality, exceeded this limit, providing in 1968 aid that totaled 1.1 billion rubles for the whole period from 1953. Also, 2,600 Vietnamese had been sent to the Soviet Union to be trained in Soviet military colleges [15]. While trying to push the North Vietnamese and American negotiators in Paris to agreement, Moscow sustained its

policy of strengthening the Soviet position in the DRV. Soviet aid to Vietnam appeared to be an important factor to this end [16].

The fear of this entry and firm support from the two great Communist countries, to some extent, discouraged the United States to launch all-out assault on the Hanoi, resulting the prolonged ground confrontations and later withdraw its troops off Vietnam.

Alliance's Withdrawal of Support

The lack of support from its allies should be a disappointing reason for the United States not to continue the war in Vietnam. In the wider world, America's war in Vietnam led to much dissent. Washington's NATO allies, for example, refused to support the war effort in South-East Asia. Even the British government, traditionally the closest to Washington, distanced itself from American policy. Others, the French government of Charles de Gaulle, were openly critical [17]. In fact, it was a war between the Vietnamese and their French colonial masters before American intervention. It was a disappointment that United States supported France's attempts at regaining control of Indochina—a key source of raw materials enabling France's economic recovery and political stability—when the French government could not return such support to the Americans.

Conclusion

In short, America, as a key player to end the WWII, was remain powerful during the post-1945 era. However, the challenges over sphere of influence between the United States and the giant socialist country, the Soviet Union, in the Cold War somehow erupted war in many places of the world. Similarly, the growing China was also limiting the power of the Soviets as well as the Americans. In the context of Vietnam War, the whole country could be destroyed with ease by the Americans if they were committed to. The power of the US can be interpreted from two Atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945. But now it is not the same. This is the United States in the context of the Cold War, not in WWII when the U.S. and the Soviet Union were backing each other to fight against the Axis powers. In this context, the U.S. and the Soviet were expanding their sphere of influence, opposing each other. Both the Soviet Union and China as the two major communist countries had been backing North Vietnam, the newly born communist country, since 1960s. So any actions against North Vietnam by the United States were, more or less, under the constraint of the USSR and China. After decades of fighting on the ground, the United States finally decided to remove its troop from South Vietnam which was interpreted as American defeat in Vietnam War.

This paper concludes that it was not because the Vietnamese troops and tactics were superior to that of the Americans, but because of a combination of internal pressure (the American politicians and people) and external pressure (war cost, the presence of the Chinese and the Soviets, and lack of support from its allies) which mounted for American withdrawal.

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Dedication

Not mentioned.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts to declare.



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