

Opinion

Was the Vietnam War Necessary?

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Apocalyptic rhetoric rolled across the airwaves on Sept. 29, 1967, as it usually does when presidents go before the American public to explain why the nation is fighting in a war. As he spoke to his national television audience, President Lyndon Johnson sought to bolster flagging public support for the Vietnam War by highlighting the calamities that might befall the United States if the Communists prevailed.

Johnson conceded that no one could see the future with certainty, but he left little doubt that he believed the rest of Southeast Asia would quickly fall to Communism once Vietnam did. Even worse, he said success in one region would embolden America's enemies to unleash new aggression elsewhere, creating immense perils for "our children and for our grandchildren."

"I am convinced," Johnson declared, "that by seeing this struggle through now, we are greatly reducing the chances of a much larger war — perhaps a nuclear war."

Johnson's words conveyed confidence, even passion, about the necessity of the war he had chosen to fight. But was he correct in his dire assessment of the stakes in Vietnam?

Developments over the next few years suggested that he wasn't. The Communist takeover of South Vietnam in 1975 unquestionably contributed to Communist

victories in neighboring Cambodia and Laos, precisely as Johnson had predicted. But his nightmare vision of regional and global catastrophe proved badly overstated. America's alliances remained intact, and American-Soviet relations moved toward détente, not war. Most troubling, Johnson had reason in 1967 to believe that defeat might have precisely such unremarkable consequences.

Two weeks before his speech, Johnson had received an unusual C.I.A. study examining the likely implications of a Communist victory in Vietnam. The 33-page report, a distillation of the opinions of more than 30 C.I.A. officers, concluded that a failure in Vietnam would not open the way to devastating setbacks, much less lead to a major war. On the contrary, the study asserted, "such risks are probably more limited and controllable than most previous argument had indicated."

Richard Helms, the director of central intelligence, knew this conclusion would not sit well with a president who had ordered American forces into combat two and a half years earlier and steadily increased the American commitment ever since. In a covering note, Helms assured Johnson that the C.I.A. was not arguing that the United States should end the war any time soon. "We are not defeatist out here," he wrote from his office in Langley, Va. Yet the report plainly suggested that the scale of America's involvement in Vietnam was out of line with that country's actual importance to the United States.

The study, titled "Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam," acknowledged that a Communist victory would amount to "a rather dramatic demonstration that there are certain limits on U.S. power, a discovery that would be unexpected for many, disconcerting for some, and encouraging to others." But none of this, Johnson was told, would amount to a disastrous blow to American security. For one thing, the report said, it would hardly come as a surprise that a highly motivated and well-supplied guerrilla movement could defeat a militarily superior power. "This is not a novel discovery," the C.I.A. pointed out.

More important, the report added, defeat in Vietnam would do nothing to undermine the "essential strength" of the United States, which would clearly remain the "weightiest single factor" in global affairs as long as it gave fresh indications of its determination to play its accustomed role. To reinforce the point, the C.I.A. looked to

the past: “Historically, great powers have repeatedly absorbed setbacks without permanent diminution of the role which they subsequently played” in international affairs.

The report also questioned the contention that defeat in Vietnam would cause governments around the world to doubt the willingness of the United States to live up to its international commitments. Since the Eisenhower years, leaders had justified their decisions to escalate American involvement in Vietnam in part on the supposition that its alliances could unravel — and Communist challenges to American interests could multiply — if other nations had reason to question Washington’s resolve when it confronted challenges.

In fact, the C.I.A. study asserted that damage to national credibility would be limited and temporary. The Soviets would continue to act with “their usual caution” and would pull back in the face of new indications of American strength, according to the report. It even speculated that willingness to accept defeat in Vietnam might improve the reputation of the United States with its NATO allies, who might view Washington’s willingness to cut its losses in a region of secondary importance as a sign of maturity rather than unreliability.

A secretary’s notation on the document, which was declassified in 1993, indicates that Johnson read the study, but there is no record of his reaction. None of his aides could recall speaking with him about it. It’s not difficult, though, to imagine why he would have ignored it.

Most obviously, he might have dismissed the document as irrelevant, since he remained convinced that the United States was on course to achieve its basic objectives in Vietnam. That, after all, would be the central theme of a major effort undertaken by the administration later in the year to re-energize the nation’s commitment to the war.

Political calculations may also have played a role. Just as in earlier years, Johnson feared that backing down in Vietnam would jeopardize his re-election in 1968 and the prospects of the Democratic Party more broadly. The party had already suffered setbacks in the 1966 congressional elections, and bigger disasters loomed if Republicans could paint their rivals as irresolute cold warriors. Closely related,

perhaps, was Johnson's concern for his own reputation and legacy. A man of towering ambitions, he shuddered at the thought of becoming the first president to lose a war.

Or it may be that Johnson simply could not see past pervasive assumptions about the monumental stakes of the war. To be sure, he had occasionally questioned the importance of Vietnam during private conversations with aides and was well aware that many prominent Americans in and out of government had long doubted the need to fight there.

But he was also steeped in a Cold War mind-set that assumed a defeat anywhere in the world could unleash domino effects, irrevocably damage American credibility, and invite larger wars. To defy this conventional wisdom, particularly at a time when thousands of Americans had already died to uphold it, would have required exceptional intellectual and political courage.

It also, though, might have been the right thing to do. Instead of seriously reckoning with the issues raised in the report, Johnson continued to insist that core American interests demanded success in Vietnam, even after events forced him in 1968 to open negotiations. His successor, Richard Nixon, was even more adamant about the dangers to American power internationally if the Communists won, and 20,000 more Americans died in the failed effort to prevent that outcome after Johnson left office.

Only after 1975 would Americans see what the C.I.A. had pointed to eight years earlier: Defeat in Vietnam, whatever the political and social traumas it produced for the United States, brought no geopolitical disaster.

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