Did the Antiwar Movement Prolong War in Vietnam?

Introduction

At the end of World War II, imperialism was coming to a close in Asia. Japan's defeat spelled the end of its control over China, Korea, and the countries of Southeast Asia. Attempts by the European nations to reestablish their empires were doomed. Anti-imperialist movements emerged all over Asia and Africa, often producing chaos.

The United States faced a dilemma. America was a nation conceived in revolution and was sympathetic to the struggles of Third World nations. But the United States was afraid that many of the revolutionary leaders were Communists who would place their countries under the control of the expanding empire of the Soviet Union. By the late 1940s the Truman administration decided that it was necessary to stop the spread of communism. The policy that resulted was known as containment.

Vietnam provided a test of the containment doctrine in Asia. Vietnam had been a French protectorate from 1885 until Japan took control of it during World War II. Shortly before the war ended, the Japanese gave Vietnam its independence, but the French were determined to reestablish their influence in the area. Conflicts emerged between the French-led nationalist forces of South Vietnam and the Communist-dominated provisional government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), which was established in Hanoi in August 1945. Ho Chi Minh was the president of the DRV. An avowed Communist since the 1920s, Ho had also become the major nationalist figure in Vietnam. As the leader of the anti-imperialist movement against French and Japanese colonialism for over 30 years, Ho managed to tie together the communist and nationalist movements in Vietnam.

A full-scale war broke out in 1946 between the communist government of North Vietnam and the French-dominated country of South Vietnam. After the Communists defeated the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, the latter decided to pull out. At the Geneva Conference that summer, Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel, pending elections.

The United States became directly involved in Vietnam after the French withdrew. In 1955 the Republican president Dwight D. Eisenhower refused to recognize the Geneva Accord but supported the establishment of the South Vietnamese government. Its leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, an authoritarian Catholic, was more popular with U.S. politicians than with the Buddhist peasants of South Vietnam, who resented his oppressive rule. In 1956 Diem, with U.S. approval, refused to hold elections, which would have provided a unified government for Vietnam in accordance with the Geneva Agreement. The Communists in the north responded by again taking up the armed struggle. The war continued for another 19 years.

Both President Eisenhower and his successor, John F. Kennedy, supported the overthrow of the Diem regime in October 1963 and hoped that the successor government would establish an alternative to communism. It did not work. Kennedy himself was assassinated three weeks later. His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, changed the character of American policy in Vietnam by escalating the air war and increasing the number of ground forces from 21,000 in 1965 to a full fighting force of 525,000 at its peak in 1968.

The next president, Richard Nixon, adopted a new policy of "Vietnamization" of the war. Military aid to South Vietnam was increased to ensure the defeat of the Communists. At the same time, American troops were gradually withdrawn from Vietnam. South Vietnamese president Thieu recognized the weakness of his own position without the support of U.S. troops. He reluctantly signed the Paris Accords in January 1973. Once U.S. soldiers were withdrawn, Thieu's regime was doomed. In the spring of 1975 a full-scale war broke out and the South Vietnamese government collapsed.

What effect did antiwar demonstrators have on the policies of the Johnson and Nixon administrations? In the following selections, Adam Garfinkle argues that the demonstrators had no effect on the escalations undertaken by Johnson and the Vietnamization of the war carried out by Nixon. He asserts that the protesters were disliked by most Americans and that they created
patriotic support for the presidents' foreign policies. Melvin Small maintains that the march on the Pentagon in October 1967 and the nationwide local mobilizations in October 1969 caused both presidents to alter their policies in Vietnam.

TRUTHS AND CONSEQUENCES: SOUTHEAST ASIA: HOW MUCH DID THE MOVEMENT MATTER?

To evaluate the effect of the antiwar movement on the prosecution of the war and its final outcome is difficult business. We can sum up our argument as follows: To the modest extent that the antiwar movement ever worked to limit U.S. involvement in Vietnam, it did so before the election of Lyndon Johnson and after the election of Richard Nixon, particularly after U.S. ground troops had been withdrawn and U.S. prisoners of war returned in early 1973. In between, and particularly in the period between 1965 and 1970 and possibly up to the 1972 election-the movement achieved nothing concrete according to its own measure and probably helped the sitting administrations to manage the broadest segments of American public opinion into relative quiescence. Its counterproductive impact may have been modest-as modest as its limiting impact before and after this core period-but that was its direction.

It is clear that the Johnson administration was self-restrained from sharp escalation, not restrained because of public opinion, which was more hawkish than the administration much of the time, or because of the antiwar movement, which was marginal to the decision-making process throughout. Antiwar demonstrations mounted and populated by radicals stifled at least as much if not more non-radical dissent against the war than they stimulated. Most Americans, while concerned about a war seemingly without end or prospect of clear cut victory, were more prepared to suffer in silence than to associate themselves with lurid leftists and yelping Yippies.

And when the Johnson administration changed course in March 1968, it did so through a calculation of various costs and benefits in which the antiwar movement counted as only one of several factors and certainly not as a major one. Nor can the changed views of the Wise Men, as they revisited the problem in February and March of that year, be ascribed to the antiwar movement in any simple way. Their changed views appear to have been predicated not only on erroneous assumptions about public opinion after the Tet offensive, but also on account of a confluence of other, more fundamental factors than what they referred to euphemistically as divisions in the nation. Even then, to the Wise Men, those divisions probably meant divisions in establishment opinion, division among Democratic politicians and opinion leaders, not the dissent represented by radicals in the streets.

The antiwar movement succeeded eventually in limiting U.S. military involvement only to the extent that antiwar sentiment became re-liberalized through the Democratic Party and its post-1969 Moratorium youth contingent. At that point, only after the fizzled incandescence of the New Left in the 1968-9 period, the movement affected marginally the timing and perhaps the tone of the decision to negotiate withdrawal, and this was done in consort with the Congress-hardly an extra-parliamentary phenomenon over all. The movement was not responsible for the overthrow of policy itself; that rested first with Lyndon Johnson's decision to change U.S. policy aims and then with Richard Nixon's decision to limit them further in deference to broader foreign and domestic policy goals.

We mustn't forget, too, that while the movement moved back toward and into the Democratic Party between 1970 and 1974, that party never had a chance to freely pursue its own plans for withdrawal from Vietnam. This is because the Republicans won the White House in the 1968 election. In other words, another layer, or filter-a Republican White House interposed itself between the flow of antiwar sentiment into mainstream politics and actual executive branch decisions about the way President Nixon did shape his administration's diplomatic and military policies over Vietnam to what he thought domestic political traffic would bear, but that isn't the same as claiming that the movement had a direct restraining influence on administration policy. Rather, the de-radicalized movement merged with growing broad public antiwar sentiment, which
pushed the Democrats, and the Democrats pushed the Republicans, who, as practicing politicians, were already looking toward the next midterm and presidential elections. Such dynamics describe what radical movement activists used to refer to derisively as "working through the system." It is hardly heroic, and hardly the stuff of which many anti-war radicals were proud then and are still proud of today.

As antiwar sentiment became more firmly ensconced in the Congress, it contributed to the cutoff of U.S. aid to South Vietnam, undermined Saigon's confidence, and contributed to its fall to the Communist regime in Hanoi. This might not have happened had the Nixon administration taken a different approach to the Paris Accords and to foreign policy priorities generally. That is to say: The White House made the essential decision to disengage using the Paris Accords as a means to create a "decent interval." It was a decision not to find out if Vietnamization would work if it took 10 to 12 years instead of 2 or 3. There was nothing inevitable about this decision, but, with a new global foreign policy to unfurl and an election to win in 1972, Richard Nixon made it. To blame the Congress entirely for the fall of South Vietnam is unfair. To blame or credit the antiwar movement isn't justified in the least.

The antiwar movement neither lost the war nor caused the subsequent bloodbath in Southeast Asia. In the broadest sense, the war was lost because the American ship of state itself had lost its bearings. The expansion of containment to Asia and its post-Korean War militarization merged with a rapidly expanding economic base to produce a level of American hubris that was bound to send its ship of state onto the rocks sooner or later. However morally motivated, the U.S. commitment to Vietnam was strategically unsound; thus, even had the war been won the costs might well have exceeded any strategic benefits. But the war was not won because U.S. administrative, diplomatic, and especially military strategies failed. In other words, even beyond a flawed decision to commit itself, which flowed from the lack of a realistic strategy for containing polycentric Communism in the geostrategic peripheries of the Cold War, the Vietnam War was lost by some combination of the U.S. military's inability to adapt to politico-military counterinsurgency warfare, ill-advised micro management of the war by Pentagon civilians, and maladroit meddling in South Vietnam's stygian political system. None of these sources of American defeat was set in motion or significantly worsened either by antiwar activism or by fear of it in Washington.

What happened to the Vietnamese and Cambodian people happened because the war was lost, but, again, the antiwar movement did not play a major role in that. The only way to argue otherwise is to assume that the movement bolstered Hanoi's morale to a decisive degree as it contemplated the "correlation of forces." No doubt the antiwar movement did boost morale in Hanoi to some degree—how could it not?—but no evidence suggests it was decisive.

Even if we assume the war was unwinnable, it still does not follow that the antiwar movement can take credit for driving that point home. The Wise Men and their bureaucratic allies made their decisions after the Tet offensive in light of their own sense of limits. After all, by March 1968 the United States had already gone beyond its self-imposed restrictions and still not won, and it had to contemplate the possibility of causing still greater damage to American life and squandering still more of its treasure without victory. Such a specter was quite sufficient to generate a change of view; it required no help from the street.

About the essential decision to fight in Vietnam, the antiwar movement was right but for the wrong reasons. The war's sources had nothing to do with the sinister face of corporate capitalism, but the war was a mistake. The Johnson administration was pursuing policies that, even though well-intended, were incoherent and unwise. Public dissent against those policies was a reasonable response to such un-wisdom. There is, after all, nothing sinister about protesting either a futile war or the steely hubris of a government that cannot recognize or admit that it has erred.

The antiwar movement was not responsible for the basic flow of American government judgments about Vietnam, and what minor influence it did have tended to reinforce policy status during the Johnson period and to quicken modestly the reduction of military activity during the Nixon period. How does this affect common arguments about the merit, the guilt, and the
responsibility that the antiwar movement should bear for what happened in Southeast Asia after 1975?

Few can doubt that a horrific bloodbath took place in Southeast Asia after 1975, and that millions of people who suddenly wanted desperately to escape their homeland did so for good reason. Doves have tended to argue that the antiwar movement saved American lives but did not sacrifice Asian ones because the war was unwinnable, and what was going to happen was going to happen eventually anyway. American participation in the war made what happened worse, they claim, especially in Cambodia, but it never could have made anything better. Most hawks have claimed the reverse, blaming what happened directly on the loss of the war, and the loss of the war on the antiwar movement and other related maladies on the home front. What are we to make of these judgments in light of the analysis brought here?

One way to answer this question is to divide our thinking into consideration of intentions and consequences. Judging intentions alone is often fruitless because the world rarely abets the simple transformation of intentions, whether good or evil, into intended consequences. Judging consequences alone, however, can suggest the premise that history proclaims its own meaning—that what happened was meant to happen—but it doesn't.

What goes for the antiwar movement goes for the war itself. Even if we discount the impact of the movement, it is still no simple matter to determine how much of what happened in Southeast Asia after 1975 was the fault of the United States. Would South Vietnam have survived without American intervention in 1964-65? If not, did all the United States achieve amount to a delay of a decade? Was that worth 58,000 American lives? Would Cambodia have been spared Pol Pot and then a Vietnamese occupation had the Nixon administration not bombed and invaded the country? Or doesn't it follow instead that a quicker Communist victory in Vietnam would have brought the Khmer Rouge to power sooner rather than later? So in consideration of intentions and consequences it is best to consider those of the antiwar movement and the government it opposed together.

As to intentions, the great majority of those active in the antiwar movement clearly felt themselves to be patriotic Americans. The movement cannot be fairly characterized as having been made up of primarily individuals who were self-hating, psychologically aberrant, or sociopathic. Acts of self-sacrifice, powerful idealism, and a deep love of country characterized the antiwar movement at least in part throughout its existence.

The U.S. government was also well-intended. It wished to stop Communism because it believed it to be wrong, and it wanted to help the Vietnamese achieve self-determination because it believed that to be right. There was no hidden agenda of economic exploitation, of seeking bases in order to wage aggressive war against China, of fighting mainly to generate profits for a military-industrial complex.

But good intentions are not always useful measures for judgment because everyone except the pathologically ill is well-intended at least on an abstract level. When parts of the antiwar movement came to believe that love for country required destroying all existing social structures and norms, it adopted the same dubious logic (dubiously) attributed to U.S. military commander who said that a certain Vietnamese village had to be destroyed in order to be saved. When the Johnson administration went to war, it did almost everything wrong, from undermining the Saigon government instead of building it up to pushing peasants and intellectuals both into the arms of the Vietcong instead of the other way around. Instead of being flexible enough to recognize error, the U.S. military pursued its counterproductive behavior to a virtual point of no return, politically if not literally, on the battlefield. So much for good intentions.

When one speaks of consequences, on the other hand, the first thing to remember is that ethics is a serious discipline. Several popular but blithe judgments that have been made about Vietnam slide off the low end of the logic scale. Some have argued, for example, that the war effort was worth it, despite the loss of South Vietnam, because it bought a decade's worth of time for the rest of Southeast Asia to mobilize and develop, and for ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) to consolidate. Is this really what 58,000 Americans died for?
Others have argued that since Communism is dead anyway, and since Vietnam is a basket case, it proves that even bothering to stop Communism in Southeast Asia was a stupid thing to do in the first place. Mickey Kaus of The New Republic argued that the best case against Communism in the area is Vietnam's economic failure, a case that never could have been made had the United States won the war: "Vietnam may even (in the long run) be better off for the Communists' victory. In power they discredited themselves in a way that never would have been possible if they'd remained a Philippine-like guerrilla opposition."

This is a worthwhile line of reasoning if only because it makes nonsense of Frances Fitzgerald's prophecies about the "cleansing effects" of the Vietnamese revolution. The only thing that the Vietnamese revolution cleansed, or should have cleansed, was the foolish idea that Third World revolutions are cleansing. But Kaus never mentions costs: the re-education camps; the boat people who left, risking or giving their lives in the process; and the millions living in deepening poverty and fear under Hanoi 5 iron fist since 1975. Is scoring a rarefied debating point about Asian Communism worth it to those who have paid the price? Too bad Kaus never bothered to ask them.

Clearly, justifying the war post hoc on the basis of "results" that were neither primary nor explicit is not very compelling. Neither is justifying opposition to the war based on information no one could possibly have had at the time; obviously, it isn't much of an achievement to conclude that the war was unwinnable after one already knows the outcome. Just because something is hard to do, such as bringing ethics to bear on a war after the fact, is no reason to be satisfied with arguments like these.

Moral judgment is always a problem but always a necessity. So I make mine: Both the government and the antiwar movement were well-intentioned, and both failed to translate good intentions into good consequences. The same can probably be said for both South and North Vietnamese leaders. Simply put, what happened both here and in South-east Asia is that the mistakes of the powerful overwhelmed the mistakes of the weak. Is it so, as Nietzsche said, that "the errors of great men are venerable because they are more fruitful than the truths of little men"? No, they are only more horrible. The antiwar movement never came close to doing the sort of harm that the failed policies of the U.S. government did. Unfortunately, it seems fairly clear that neither movement nor government did anybody in Vietnam any good at all....

THE POLITICS OF MEMORY: BEYOND FAITH AND REASON

The telltale heart beats loudest within the breasts of those who were there at the creation of the antiwar movement and who lived through its intense, unstuck times. This is the font of the politics of memory, elusive and unfathomable, yet indelible and ineradicable. The movement's consequences for the Vietnam generation, and through it for America itself, have been felt already for a decade or more. They can never be wholly undone. As Nicholas Lemann [born in 1954] and so many others have come to realize:

Everything is pretty much the same on the surface. Underneath, everything is different. We have no center. Our parents did....People like me assumed the [American] enterprise was not noble, rebelled against it for a time, and then joined it, not out of the sincere belief of our parents, but because there was no other choice. That's why today, although we're better educated than they were, we vote less. It's why....we feel no loyalty to our employers. It's why marriage and children scare us....When that is the way you are, how do you conduct your life?

It's a tough question.

Whether the revolt of the 1960s, excesses and all, helped move America back to its original spiritual career remains to be seen. Even most 1960s apologists seem unaware of what it is that the youth revolt of the 1960s was trying to teach us. It needs to teach us this: The centrality of value, as communicated and sacralized within the most deeply rooted of family processes, is the core of any healthy society. Without it, we are lost. It comes down to knowing the difference between right and wrong and being able to teach this to our children with sincerity and confidence.

The fact that this issue was raised by the tumult of the 1960s, even if inchoately, is what redeems the entire epoch if nothing else does. This key point, too, has a way of suggesting whether
and if the ideas of the 1960s are still meaningful. It is a simple thing really: If the problems that evoked the 1960s have been solved, then the ideas lose force and interest. "Ideas perish from inanition far more frequently than as a result of being refuted by argument," said Isaiah Berlin, because the problems they were designed to confront are no longer pressing. "Philosophy comes from the collision of ideas which create problems. Life changes, so do the ideas, so do the collisions."

But the cultural critique made in the 1960s has not gone away; the strong attraction to the 1960s is not mere nostalgia. The French have a phrase that may explain this attraction: jolie laide. This literally translates as "good-looking ugly woman." What it means is a woman who is somehow attractive despite not being conventionally pretty. This phrase well describes the 1960s. The reason so many remain fascinated with these difficult and even embarrassing times is that the deeper issues that gave rise to the revolt are with us still. We have not solved the riddle of how to live meaningful and happy lives beyond the ages of both faith and reason. Until we do, the 1960s and other molten times like them will tantalize us with visions of a better world, even amid the miseries of generational warfare and the inevitable anxieties of social change.