

Part VI: Applying the Lessons of Vietnam

Instructions: People have long debated whether the study of history can provide useful lessons to guide future behavior. The American philosopher George Santayana warned that “those who cannot remember the lessons of the past are condemned to repeat it.” In contrast, the American inventor and father of the assembly line, Henry Ford, declared that “history is bunk!” Just as people learn from their experiences, so nations, it is argued, learn lessons from history. Many lessons from the American experience in Vietnam have been put forth by historians, politicians, and media commentators. Several of these are summarized below. Read them carefully and answer the following questions for each:

1. Explain why you think this lesson is valid or invalid.
2. If the lesson is valid, how should U.S. behavior change in the future? Are there any foreign policy issues today in which this particular lesson may be a useful guide?

Extra challenge: Can you recognize how these lessons were applied by U.S. decision-makers in subsequent cases of American military involvement abroad, such as Lebanon (1983), Grenada (1983), the Persian Gulf crisis (1990-91), Somalia (1992-93), Bosnia (1995-2004), Afghanistan (2001-) and Iraq (2003-)?



“Slow learner”

Lesson A: Fight to win; there is no substitute for victory. The American defeat was caused by the failure of the United States to apply its overwhelming military superiority without restrictions. The U.S. government did not try to win. Instead, its objective was to not lose. **Argument:** Throughout the war, the U.S. military was restricted in what tactics could be used, what targets in North Vietnam could be hit, and how many men could be deployed. Fears of negative domestic political repercussions,

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the displeasure of our allies, and possible involvement by the Soviets or Chinese led the U.S. government to “pull its punches.”

Lesson B: Make it quick; make it decisive. The American people grow weary of costly, drawn-out wars that appear to be fought for limited objectives. **Argument:** The people of a democracy will initially support efforts to stop aggression and punish the aggressors. As the struggle continues with mounting costs and unclear results, domestic political opposition will limit the ability of the U.S. government to continue such a policy. There will be strong pressure to escalate or to pull out. The energy that democracies like the United States can bring to a worthy cause must be used quickly, or it will erode.

Lesson C: There is no point in thinking about Vietnam; it cannot happen again. Since the combination of circumstances encountered in Vietnam was unique, there is no “lesson of Vietnam” beyond the simple conclusion that the United States should not get involved in Vietnam again. **Argument:** The failure of the United States to achieve its objectives in Vietnam was caused by several factors, including the difficult jungle terrain, the presence of enemy supply routes that could not be effectively cut, a determined foe that had been fighting for national independence for twenty years, and the lack of popular support for the South Vietnamese government. It is extremely unlikely that the United States will ever again encounter this combination of obstacles. To become obsessed with non-existent lessons would be a mistake, and would inhibit U.S. foreign policy in the future.

Lesson D: Once you have climbed onto the back of the tiger, you have lost your ability to determine where and when you will dismount. Major foreign policy commitments, publicly repeated time and time again, significantly reduce the United States’ freedom of action. Events then tend to control U.S. policy, rather than U.S. policy-makers shaping events. **Argument:** Once the major commitments were

made in the early and mid-1960s, the United States could not have backed down and accepted the loss of international prestige and influence that such a public reversal would have entailed. Since the situation in Vietnam was far more difficult than our nation had expected, the eventual defeat and national humiliation were inevitable.

Lesson E: If you do not level with the people in the beginning, they will not follow you to the end. A government that loses its credibility with the people loses the ability to mobilize the resources of the nation effectively to achieve difficult and costly objectives.

Argument: The Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations intentionally concealed from the American people and the Congress the gravity of the battlefield situation in Vietnam, their pessimism about the chances of achieving a favorable outcome, and their estimates of the likely costs and duration of the war. As the American people and the Congress discovered that the war was not going as promised, they ceased to trust their government, and the resulting “credibility gap” fatally damaged the government’s ability to lead the nation to victory.

Lesson F: The United States is not all-powerful. Regardless of their desirability, some objectives are just not within the reach of U.S. capabilities, even when these capabilities are employed intelligently and with national determination. **Argument:** The long, nearly unbroken string of foreign policy successes after 1946 led U.S. leaders to believe in their invincibility and wisdom. At least initially, most U.S. decision-makers never seriously questioned whether the United States could and should have shaped the situation in Southeast Asia. Evidence to the contrary was ignored and criticism was dismissed. This “arrogance of power” led to the tragedy of Vietnam.

Lesson G: Be very careful what historical lessons you try to apply. By learning too well a lesson from a past experience, a nation may see present challenges through the distorted

prism of its memories. This distortion can lead to mistaken policies and ineffective strategies. **Argument:** The lesson of the 1938 Munich agreement dominated the perceptions and responses of U.S. leaders during the 1950s and early 1960s. Similarly, the successes in Western Europe in containing Soviet power led the United States to apply the same methods elsewhere. The situation in Southeast Asia was quite different. The misapplication of the Hitler analogy and the containment strategy led to commitments and policies that could not work regardless of the investment in men and money. The problem in Vietnam was not one of external aggression by a militaristic neighbor, but rather was primarily one of an unresolved civil war that had begun in 1946.

Lesson H: An unrestricted press severely limits the ability of a democracy to fight effectively in a long, complicated war. Since the nature of the media is to focus on the sensational and the tragic, the American people inevitably receive a distorted picture of the war effort. Public reaction to these distortions deprives the government of the support necessary to continue the war. **Argument:** Vietnam was the first “television war.” The horrible cost of the war came into American living rooms every evening. The reporters, many of whom were critical of the policies and objectives of the U.S. government in Vietnam, chose to emphasize stories and interpretations critical of the war effort. This biased reporting shaped the perceptions of Americans at home and eroded public support for the war effort.

Lesson I: A team will not win if the players are continually squabbling with the coach, and refusing to execute his or her plays, insisting that theirs be tried instead. The separation of powers in the American system of government leads to jealousy and rivalry between the executive and legislative branches. During a difficult and complex war, congressional criticism and obstructionism can deprive the president of the prestige and tools necessary to achieve victory. **Argument:** Although the

Congress, with very few exceptions, initially supported the war effort, distrust of the White House, disappointment with the lack of progress in the war, and the suspicion that the White House was manipulating Congress caused significant vocal opposition as the war dragged on. This opposition weakened the U.S. position abroad and convinced Hanoi that it could outlast the United States and achieve its long-term goals in South Vietnam.

Lesson J: Do not go it alone when you go to war. The application of U.S. military power is most effective when it is done in the context of a joint effort involving many nations, even if the United States makes the major contribution. **Argument:** The United States failed in its half-hearted attempts to involve its allies in the Vietnam war. Since most of our allies did not perceive the situation and stakes in South Vietnam the way that the United States did, with a few exceptions (small contingents from South Korea, Australia and New Zealand) the United States fought alone with the ARVN. Because our traditional European allies were not involved, they were free to criticize the U.S. effort. These criticisms and the apparent absence of unity among the Western democracies encouraged the resistance of the communists and fed domestic unrest at home. The Korean War demonstrated that a multilateral approach can be very useful in cloaking unilateral objectives and actions.

Lesson K: Do not get involved in ground wars on the Asian mainland. Ground wars on the Asian mainland are enormously difficult and next to impossible for the United States to win. **Argument:** Since the population of Asia is many times more than that of the United States, our forces run the risk of being outnumbered. In addition, the terrain lends itself to guerrilla warfare, meaning that large numbers of U.S. troops would be tied down in a protracted conflict, while the enemy would likely enjoy popular support and benefit from resentment against Western imperialism.