



# ENDURANCE

*A Parallel History of the  
American Experience in Vietnam -  
the Why, the How, and the  
What of it All*

**(The Close)**

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# Chapter 11

## The Close

*Wars are fought in two dimensions – time and place.*

*Anonymous*

So here we are, at journey's end.

And we've covered a lot of ground, some old, (the Enlightenment to the Cold War), some historical (the closing of the colonial era), some new (the three-realm dynamic), and some s-t-r-e-t-c-h ground as well (Imperial Japan saving Western Civilization.)

Though ranging far and wide, it has not been my intention to stand back so far from Vietnam as to use history itself to obscure our experience there. To the contrary. I have endeavored to be precise about our track to it and our objectives in it — claimed, perceived, achieved — as well as the objectives of others.

Further, I have addressed the moral considerations and consequences of going in, of being there, of our getting out, and it getting over. In doing this, I have tried to locate the dozen or so years of the American experience in Vietnam in the Cold War—itsself forty some years of humankind at the brink.

In the modern era of the West, the dominant socio-philosophical undertaking has been the testing of a single premise: That every single human life is good and of value in and of itself by the simple reason of its own existence.

Indeed, it is in and by this that the core values of the West — *individual worth* and *personal responsibility* — have taken form and from which has emerged the *three-realm dynamic*. Among nations, and within them, it goes to this: *Does the state own the people or do the people own the state?*

Human history for centuries passed was largely of states and nations, about structures, both religious and political, tracking their rise and fall. Persons were noted and measured, but largely in the context of the state and/or church where they sought power, while those with no power labored to avoid being controlled and abused by those who did.

Building through the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, the American and French revolutions changed all this, in fact reversing it for a growing number of nations, though not necessarily forever. “A republic, madam,” Franklin replied to a Mrs. Powell when asked on the closing of the Constitutional Convention of what they had wrought, “if you can keep it.”

As founded on this reversal of power in the evolution of nation states, the lives we now live in this country remain *revolutionary*. Indeed, what we presume in the living of our everyday lives within the three realms is historically *radical* and recent, barely for two hundred years.

And to the average American’s understanding of the word *revolution*, October 1917 in Russia was a fraud — a cruel hoax, at best an illusion. The Russian revolution was in fact little more than a ten-year interregnum of chaos marking the transfer of power from one totalitarian mechanism of government to the next and distinguished from its sister Chinese experience more than anything by the duration of the chaos it occasioned.

Fraud though it may have been, the Russian Revolution initiated a contest of minds and nations that was to engulf the planet for the next *seventy years*. It was not just an idea, it was an idea that *required*, by its own internal design and dynamic, adoption by *all nations everywhere for its own validation*. It was to happen in *every* nation on earth, the only questions allowed being *How?* and *When?* i.e., conform or be conformed, from within or from without, but *conformed*.

This was the basis of the Cold War.

By the mid-1960s nations adopting the Communist/Socialist model numbered more than twenty, stretching from Berlin to the Pacific Ocean, nearly the entirety of the Eurasian landmass. More ominously, two such would possess nuclear weapons systems

capable of, perhaps, destroying all human life on the planet. Indeed, the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 was not simply gist for later documentaries. No. It spoke of nuclear war really *happening*, perhaps ending as it did only because one side convinced the other side *that it really might*.

Coincident with the advent of Communism was the post-WWII breakup of European colonial holdings, most notably those of Britain, France, Belgium, and Portugal. Impacting primarily Africa and Asia, the breakup set off a geopolitical contest over the sort of governmental systems the newly independent nations would adopt, i.e., a parliamentary system of European origin or a Communist system of Leninist/Marxism designs, the groupings coming to common reference as the West and East blocs, respectively.

It was in the context of this dynamic that the United States participated in the 1954 *Geneva Accords* to bring to a close the *First Indochina War* between France and Ho Chi Minh's Peoples Democratic Republic of Vietnam, i.e., DRV. The key effect of the *Accords* was the separation of Vietnam into North and South halves at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel – the DMZ – with an accompanying provision for a national plebiscite to be held in 1956 to determine whether the two parts would be united.

In 1956, Diem refused to participate in the plebiscite on the grounds it was not practical at that time. Consequently, civil war ensued, first on a guerilla scale before gradually escalating to one of extended engagement between main force battle units of the United States of America and the DRV, and later between the DRV and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

For our immediate purposes, the Geneva Accords had secured for the RVN a tier-one position in the sorting out of who's to be on whose side – East or West – just as the post-colonial marathon hit full stride in the early 1960s.

Unwilling to see South Vietnam fall to Hanoi and the Communist camp, the U.S. effectively claimed the war there as its own. Eventually this was to bring us to one-on-one, face-to-face combat with the DRV, an adversary whose resourcefulness, nationalistic purpose, and uncompromising dedication to total victory *was wholly unappreciated*.

Moreover, in assuming the burden of the fighting in 1965,

we had not by 1970 afforded the South Vietnamese armed forces a substantive role in the war, nor forced the RVN into one. To have a chance of surviving the inevitable withdrawal of American forces, the RVN needed ownership of the fight. With the NVA and VC forces in 1969 still recovering after the Tet and its later offensives of 1968, there was something of a window of opportunity to train and equip the RVN, to catch up.

On taking office in 1969, Nixon wanted to win in Vietnam, apart from the larger world stage, and made some hard decisions to get that done – the secret bombing of Cambodian base areas, the 1970 Cambodia incursion, Vietnamization, and most significantly the mining of Haiphong Harbor, which risked his long-sought Moscow summit of May 1972. Nixon's thinking was that we had brought the RVN into the war, giving them good reason to believe that together we could and would win it, putting them at risk of far greater losses than they would have suffered had we not. In effect, we owed them.

Moreover, there was reason for optimism. In the first three years of his presidency, especially from the latter half of 1969 through all of 1971, the cities of South Vietnam were largely at peace. Indeed, in the four years of Nixon's first term, American KIAs declined dramatically, from more than 9,000 in 1969 to less than 200 in 1972, with the South Vietnamese withstanding a major DRV offensive in the spring of 1972, albeit with critical U. S. air support.

Unlike Nixon, Kissinger simply wanted out, seeing Vietnam and all of Southeast Asia by then as largely a sideshow and impediment to the real game, which for him, was Moscow. Whatever differences Nixon and Kissinger may have had, though, were largely overwhelmed by the DRV's absolute refusal to negotiate an end to the fighting until we had unseated the Thieu government.

To Nixon, this was both illogical and repugnant. The RVN was holding its own as Vietnamization had shifted more and more of the combat burden to the RVN's army. Moreover, betraying an ally was contrary to his every political instinct. To Nixon, it was not so much to whom he had given his word but that his word had been given.

For Ho Chi Minh's successors, though, Nixon could give his word to whomever he pleased. Their demands were of an existential

nature. They were Vietnamese, founders of the People's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). The Viets had been on that ground, moving over, around and in it for centuries and absolutely none of it was up for barter or for sale. It was sacred ground to them, all of it, and they meant to hold it safe from the trespass of any other nation's geopolitical needs. Full Stop.

It was in this that the question as to whether Ho and his successors were primarily communists or nationalists comes to the fore. That they purposefully eliminated, i.e., killed, thousands of non-communist nationalists points to their communist leanings. That they built their party and state on the hierarchical structure of traditional Vietnam and, most notably, that they sacrificed so many thousands of lives in years of war to unite all *Vietnamese* people under one flag, speaks to the latter, their being primarily nationalists, and increasingly so over the war years.

And this brings us back to the beginning of the American experience in Vietnam, the period following the Geneva Accords of 1954 into the early 1960s. The particular issue at that time was whether Laos, a newly independent country from what previously had been French Indochina, would align with the East or West. While Laos was at that time to declare itself neutral, SEA's rising profile as *contested ground* in the Cold War was assured.

As much as anything, though, the contest for Laos' affiliation, East or West, points to the fact that there were, in effect, two groups of nations in the region. The first was composed of the former elements of French Indochina, i.e., Cambodia, Laos and the two Vietnams. The second grouping, and the lion's share of the region, comprised Burma (now Myanmar), Indonesia, Malayasia, Singapore, Thailand, and The Philippines.

While the DRV and Laos were or became communist states, the lion's share of SEA, those listed above plus Cambodia, did not. Having strengthened and matured organizationally, politically, and economically in the course of the war, they emerged as free-standing, independent nation-states, each with its own iteration of a three-realm dynamic mechanism of government, and they remain so today.

Indeed, when this book was begun, it was to make the point that while we failed to achieve an independent, non-communist

Republic of Vietnam, we had, in fact, a larger, and wholly legitimate *objective*, that being the stabilization of Southeast Asia as a region of economically successful and politically independent nation states—and *this was achieved*.

We have come to a term, the *fog of war*, which I take to mean a decline in control, awareness, and direction, that events have somehow overtaken intention, expectation, and logical process. There is a certain escapism in this, a passing of the buck. Perhaps. But it is real as well. To paraphrase Mrs. Gump, “War’s like a box of chocolates, Forrest. You never know what you’re gonna get.”

From July 1965 when LBJ made the decision to commit in force on the ground in Vietnam, through 1966 and 1967, there was an escalation of conflict in which the United States of America could not prevail as it had expected, but, at the same time could not withdraw without damaging significantly, perhaps irreparably, *its leadership of the West where its projection of power was the linchpin of the NATO Alliance*.

And with this, a new moral dimension emerged, that of war in a corner of Asia as the greater powers of the earth worked out their places and needs above and beyond it. In effect, Vietnam as an element of the Cold War was migrating from platform and venue of statement and purpose to that of an obstacle to progress in the larger world, the place from which it had spun off.

Ironically, Tet 1968, in some measure, changed that. We stood fast, pushed back, in effect, for another four years. But this surrogate war, which for the United States the war in Vietnam most assuredly was, had come to show itself more violent and costly in lives and treasure than anticipated, or any longer fully appropriate to our global purposes.

Even more, domestically, a gnawing sense of opposition was rising, coming eventually to a thundering crescendo “Hell no, we won’t go!” And still more, an unfairness to it all, so many being called to serve, many to die, while others had not, many finding the safe harbor of deferment, still others refusing to serve.

Most certainly there was an unfairness for the Vietnamese people, playing host to a war whose intensity, human cost, and duration was forced by powers and events wholly outside their own frame of reference. Where, indeed, was the fairness, the morality in this?

But in a world fully capable, literally, of blowing itself up, in a world where two resurgent dynasties – Russia and China – were each shouldering their way through, in real time, to a new place at the table of nations, the forces of history will out. There will be conflict, people are going to get hurt, even die. Yes, as noted earlier, in relations and contests between and among the nations of the earth, all is complexity and absolutely nothing is simple or certain.

Indeed, in the recent history of such transformations, those of Germany and Japan coming first to mind, and at so terrible a cost, the Cold War was, in fact, transformation at one remove, the mega carnage twice suffered earlier in that century largely avoided.

So, if you served in Vietnam, or lost someone who did, stand strong. Though not pretty, with those in charge seemingly determined at times to fight it without regard to any common sense at all, what we sought there, what we needed from our commitment in Vietnam, was gotten – *time*.

In that one place, small by standards of territory, all the forces and complexity of world conflict that defined history's most tumultuous century were engaged — remnants of world war, the passing of monarchy and colonialism, the containment of Communism, the rise of nationalism, all of these and more.

Certainly, in the Republic of Vietnam, there were great numbers who did not want to live under a Communist or Stalinist regime, counting first among these the 900,000 who left the North for the South in 1954, giving up everything.

It was in fact a civil war, as so many American critics of our participation claimed, which is to say that the war was going to happen whether we were there or not. Claiming it as our own, though, as an element of the Cold War, we substantially raised the stakes in lives and treasure, as well as in the complexity of resolution.

In the end, our ignorance and arrogance were instrumental in the conduct of a war that, by and large, had got out of hand. Because of the times, the war in Vietnam was to take on dimensions well beyond the interests of the people living there such that the particular tragedy attending a civil war was magnified many times over.

For too much of it, it was a war between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the United States of America, returning in its closing years to one between the DRV and the Republic of Vietnam.

In the end, it was a war for time and for place, we needing the time, the DRV wanting the place.

That the DRV got the place it sought, however, should not diminish the fact that Southeast Asia got the time it needed to become the region of politically stable and economically vibrant nations that it now is. In fact, the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) today comprise the fifth largest - and the most rapidly growing - economic community in the world.

The positive impact of the American commitment to the continuing political stability and economic development of Southeast Asia is a matter of fact and historical record. That was the goal, and that was the result.

As noted above, though, the devil of a thing can be in the details of it. Yes, the details. Execution, that can be the true hell of a thing, especially as regards international affairs. It is here, in international affairs, where intentions can too quickly go awry; misunderstanding going to contact, contact to contest, contest to dispute, and dispute to war.

That our experience in Vietnam cost so much more than it might have is a tragedy of historic proportions. Learned at such a price, though, the lessons of and from it will continue to inform and impact our international intentions and policies for decades more to come. What must not change, though, in international affairs or anywhere else, is a continuing and fervent commitment to our core values - *individual worth* and *personal responsibility*.

Yes, our values. And what is the worth and use of a value if not nurtured, promoted, and shared? And was it not our values that so marked our entry onto the world stage in, during, and after World War II? Further, was it not from WWII that America went international, became the only player left standing? *Hey, mister, can you spare me a dime?*

Indeed, for one of the few times in all recorded human history, there really was, in fact, *only one player left standing*. Yes, and it was the United States of America. And despite a heartland that still wanted little to do with foreign affairs, we had no choice but to engage in a world we had a history of avoiding, yes, to provide leadership where there then was *none*.

And as with all things of complexity and substance, the only way to succeed in international affairs is to participate in it, and with

great attention, diligence, and clarity of purpose. As the only player left standing in August 1945, and with deep pockets chuck full of dimes, we set off to save the world, one that would include Vietnam. It was the cost and price of global leadership.

It has now been eighty years since the close of WWII and nary a hot World War has come, nor is one now in prospect. This is not to understate the human cost of the wars in Vietnam and Korea. Not at all. It is to recognize them and those who fought and served in them. Indeed, it is to understand better and more completely where each fits best in our country's history, to learn from them in engaging the ever-challenging world of international affairs.

In fact, we are now back to the same 'ol, same 'ol of yore – ethnically – and nationally – driven international issues and needs, causes and crises, disputes and wars, all rising and falling on the world stage, being careful to meet them as they each might emerge, ever driven by and fully conscious of our *core values*.

So, of Vietnam and our experience there, and what was needed from it. As above, it was *time* that was needed, and it was *time* that was won, in a Cold War then, now over and done.

Endured.

History comes in several sorts,  
that to be celebrated and then that  
to be endured.  
And of that to be endured, there is  
that to be celebrated as endured,  
as in gotten through, as in met  
then and now done.

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To  
the Lost and  
the Living  
of It