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Who Really Lost the War in Vietnam?

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By Ton That Thien

In his book "In Retrospect," Robert McNamara has started a new controversy about the Vietnam War by calling it "terribly wrong." But was it really wrong? And in the long run, was the U.S. the real loser? Twenty years after the fall of Saigon, it is clear that while America lost the war in Vietnam, it won the equally important fight for freedom in the rest of Southeast Asia. Just as significantly, the legacy the Americans left in South Vietnam was never entirely lost. In fact, there is every sign it will be the ultimate victor.

For Mr. McNamara, Defense Secretary to both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, to say that the war was "terribly wrong" is the supreme insult to those 58,000 Americans who were asked to give their lives in the defense of freedom. But it would be accurate to say that the American management of the war was terribly wrong. And as Vietnamese Communist documents make abundantly clear, the most terrible American mistakes were early signs of weakness, not decisions to wage war.

The most revealing sources are secret letters sent from Hanoi by the Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Le Duan, to Nguyen Van Linh and other central committee comrades in the South. In these letters, not published until 1986, Le Duan explained in detail Hanoi's strategy and tactics. While Le Duan's secret letters to the Central Committee in the South reveal Hanoi's deep doubts about winning the war, they also document its recovery of confidence after the conference on Laos in 1961-62 offered convincing evidence of faltering U.S. resolve.

Once the U.S. accepted Communist terms for Laos, and made inquiries through channels to see whether Hanoi would accept the same kind of settlement for Vietnam, Le Duan saw a green light. As his letters make clear, he knew then that if the Communists clenched their teeth, took the blows, and persisted, they would win in the end.

The American abandonment of Laos not only cleared a way for Hanoi's free and massive dispatch of troops and material to South Vietnam. It also incensed South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, leading him to mistrust the Americans and to stop listening to them. The result was the coup that overthrew and killed Diem in November 1963.

The White House and State Department officials who advocated the coup asserted that there was a better chance of winning the war under the leadership of South Vietnamese generals. But one of the first things the generals did was dismantle the strategic hamlets network, which Le Duan had found so effective against his forces of revolution that

he felt it necessary in July 1962 to write: "We must absolutely not allow ourselves to become alarmed and to lose faith because of the temporary difficulties occasioned by the enemy's gathering of the population into the strategic hamlets." Then the generals fell to squabbling, plotting and staging coups against each other instead of running the war. We all know the result.

Again, it was the U.S. management at the top that was so "terribly wrong." If Diem -- and especially his brother Nhu, who was also stubbornly opposed to the introduction of U.S. troops to Vietnam -- had not been removed, the war might still have been lost, but 58,000 American lives would surely have been saved.

Now we come to another major flaw in Mr. McNamara's analysis of the war: his assumption that it was "lost" and unnecessary. Really? If the French period is counted in, the war in Vietnam delayed a Communist takeover in Indochina for three decades between 1945 and 1975. It preoccupied the local Communists and their allies, forcing them to dissipate their energies. It denied them the free use of Vietnam's vast resources and the control of strategic positions from which to stir up revolution in the rest of Southeast Asia. The countries of this region were thus given 30 precious years of peace and security to engage in economic development, solve their social problems, and avoid Vietnam-like Communist-led revolutions. The 400 million people of Southeast Asia would not enjoy great prosperity today, and have such a bright future, if Americans and free Vietnamese had not fought to stem the Communist tide in Vietnam during those years.

The enormousness of that accomplishment is increasingly evident in Vietnam itself. Despite war, in the years when they had American help and aid the people of South Vietnam began building a non-Communist economic (and even political) structure. This structure was so solid, in fact, that after 1975 the war-weakened Communists were unable to eradicate it. Worse for them, the democratic, independent and enterprising spirit of the Southern Vietnamese infected the people of the North.

So it is that 20 years after their sweeping military victory, the Hanoi Communist leadership has not only failed to break the psychological resistance of the South but now faces similar problems in the North -- and inside the party itself. More and more, of the cadres now demand the abandonment of socialism, the adoption of pluralist multiparty democracy and the recognition of the right to own property. This ability to speak without total fear is another legacy of the Americans and free Vietnamese, who left behind a Vietnamese Communist Party too weak to risk smoking out its own beehive.

The Communists may have won a military struggle in Vietnam, but they lost the larger battle to impose communism across Southeast Asia. Slowly, perhaps, but surely even Vietnamese communism is going to give way to democracy and free enterprise. Those are accepted ideals today and, they were no less worthy decades ago.

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