



WHY DID AMERICA FIGHT THE VIETNAM WAR?

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

The Vietnam War lasted ten years, cost America 58,000 lives and over a trillion dollars, adjusted for inflation. It brought down a president, stirred social unrest, and ended in defeat.

No one in hindsight believes fighting a losing war is ever worth the cost. Consequently, the Vietnam War is usually written off as a colossal strategic blunder and a humanitarian disaster.

Yet, historical appraisals might have been much different had the Vietnam War followed the pattern of the Korean War, which the United States fought for almost identical reasons: the defense of freedom in Asia.

The U.S. had military advisors in Vietnam during the 1950s, but didn't become involved in a major way until 1963. President John F. Kennedy firmly believed in the "domino effect," the foreign policy theory that vulnerable nations without help would fall, one after another, like dominos, to external communist aggression.

Kennedy thus hoped to stop Soviet and Chinese-backed communist invasions in the manner President Harry Truman had in Korea by taking a stand in Vietnam.

As with Korea, it was a war the United States did not seek. As with Korea, Vietnam presented no "imperial" advantages: no natural resources, or resources of any kind, that the United States needed to protect or wished to obtain. As with Korea, the aggressor was a communist government in the North intent on taking control of the South, and its military crossed an internationally recognized border to do so.

Following Kennedy's assassination in November of 1963, President Lyndon Johnson vastly escalated America's role in 1964. But even as he did so, Johnson prosecuted the war with deep ambivalence, authorizing significantly more troops and money for the war, but never pushing for total victory. In contrast, the North Vietnamese never wavered. They ignored every one of Johnson's many offers to negotiate a settlement.

By 1971, the war was at a stalemate, neither side able to establish a clear advantage. The president, Richard Nixon, pursued a two-prong strategy—to turn over combat operations to the South Vietnamese, and to bomb North Vietnam. The effort brought the communists to the Paris Peace Talks. And by 1973, the North agreed to a general settlement, establishing two autonomous Vietnamese nations—one communist, one non-communist—in the manner of North and South Korea.

However, the Watergate scandal, the subsequent resignation of President Nixon, and the Democrats' sweeping congressional victory in the 1974 mid-term election all helped to convince the North Vietnamese that America would not enforce the peace agreement.

They were right.

Without U.S. air support and material aid, the South Vietnamese had no chance against the North. Well supplied by the Soviet Union and the Chinese, the communists gained full control over the country in April 1975.

The war proved far more costly than Korea because the geography and landscapes of Vietnam were far more conducive to insurgency operations. There were also far more restrictions placed on American commanders than during the Korean War. And the United States in the 1960s was a far less conservative and cohesive country than America of the 1950s.

Yet despite the long ordeal and terrible costs, South Vietnam was saved in 1973—only to be lost in 1975. The US defeat in Vietnam was a political choice, not a military necessity.

Had the U.S. protected an independent, but vulnerable, South Vietnam in 1973 and -4, that country would have most likely followed the model of South Korea. Millions of Southeast Asians would not have become boat people and refugees, or been sent to gulags and reeducation camps.

A viable U.S.-backed democratic Vietnam would have stabilized the region and almost certainly prevented the neighboring Cambodian genocide, in which one-fifth of that country—2 million people—were slaughtered by its communist leadership.

And much of the bitterness over the war on both sides of the American political spectrum, still with us today, would have vanished.

And for the communist Vietnamese—the instigators and aggressors of the terrible conflict—what was it all for? Today, ironically, the Vietnamese government aspires to nothing more than the capitalist affluence that it once reviled.

I'm Victor Davis Hanson, of the Hoover Institution, for Prager University.