

What Biden Should Learn From Indochina

France's withdrawal shows sometimes the costs of maintaining the status quo are higher than the costs of a drastic policy change.

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U.S. President Joe Biden's announcement that all U.S. troops would depart Afghanistan by Sept. 11—after more than 20 years of conflict there—has led to much debate. Some have praised the decision as a necessary break with the logic of endless wars while others have condemned the president's abrupt withdrawal decision as a historic mistake and an abandonment of the United States' moral responsibility to help Afghanistan develop a strong and functioning state and prevent a Taliban takeover.

Throughout the years of debating U.S. Afghan policy, leaders and advocates have looked for insights from the history of U.S. military interventions elsewhere, especially Iraq and Vietnam. It is reported, for instance, that then-U.S. President Barack Obama advocated against military expansion in Afghanistan in 2009 after reading Gordon M. Goldstein's *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, which chronicled the flaws of an incremental escalation strategy in Vietnam in the 1960s.

Writing in the *Atlantic*, meanwhile, author George Packer referred to the lessons Biden may have drawn from when the United States withdrew from South Vietnam in the mid-1970s. And in a 2009 conversation with former U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke, reported in Packer's book *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century*, Packer stated Biden directly equated the Afghanistan and Vietnam situations, notably to justify a complete withdrawal of Afghanistan, something former U.S. President Richard Nixon and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, had managed to get "away with" in the 1970s in Vietnam.

Such reasoning makes sense. Biden had a direct personal experience with the decisions of this period as a young first-term senator and an outspoken critic of the financial and human costs of the Vietnam War. Yet another, less obvious analogy has started to bubble up: Pierre Mendès-France's fateful decision to withdraw from Indochina in 1954. The French politician, who was a severe critic of successive Fourth Republic governments' Indochina policies, was elected president of the Council of Ministers (equivalent to prime minister) in June 1954, soon after his country's military defeat to the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu. Mendès-France pledged he would end France's involvement in Indochina within 30 days, and his promise was effectively fulfilled at the 1954 Geneva Conference.

Political commentator Fareed Zakaria has cited this crucial policy decision as a good example of assertive decision-making. He even recently invoked Mendès-France's famous maxim "to govern is to choose" to justify Biden's Afghanistan decision. As with most historical analogies, contemporary applications and understandings can be debated. Building on the same historical reference, for example, Brookings Institution fellow Jeremy Shapiro, has—in sharp contrast—faulted Biden for being hesitant.

But is the Indochina analogy relevant or useful? Most historians would balk at this analogical exercise given the important differences between the two contexts. In the 1950s, France was a colonial power in decline following World War II. The United States was still a global superpower that, under a new administration, was reconsidering its military role in Afghanistan in light of global strategic shifts. In the case of Indochina, French withdrawal involved a political-institutional process to end a colonial presence that dated back to the second half of the 19th century. The United States is planning a military withdrawal after a comparatively short 20-year involvement.

Nevertheless, there are important similarities and possible lessons. First, both states were war-weary. Mendès-France and Biden inherited long, costly wars with unclear and changing strategic objectives. Although many supporters of the First Indochina War effort emphasized the political, military, and diplomatic stakes, Mendès-France was mainly preoccupied with the increasing financial costs of a war he argued was “badly run on the political, military, and moral levels.” And, he said, “things were even worse in budgetary terms.” By 1954, the overall cost of the war had been 3 billion francs (or approximately \$8.2 billion in 2020 currency), of which France paid 70 percent of the total. The rest came as support from U.S. aid. French military and financial involvement also drastically increased following China’s growing support to Vietnam after 1949. The French government had to triple its military budget between 1948 and 1952 to meet mounting military commitments in both the European and Indochina theaters. And so, in June 1954, Mendès-France explained a negotiated peace in Indochina was necessary for the “reordering of our finances, the recovery of our economy and its expansion ... because this war placed an unbearable burden on our country.”

Similarly, Biden has argued against “keeping thousands of troops grounded and concentrated in just one country at a cost of billions each year,” saying it “makes little sense to me and to our leaders.” According to a recent report, the Afghanistan War effectively cost more than \$2 trillion and hundreds of thousands of lives. He said reducing these financial expenses are crucial to be able to fund ambitious social and economic programs and priorities at home—much as Mendès-France did as well.

Second, both statesmen recognized these wars were not going in their favor. Mendès-France was convinced that since 1950, a negotiated settlement with the adversary had been “commanded by the facts” on the ground. That had become self-evident following the Dien Bien Phu military defeat