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America Lost Vietnam but Saved Southeast Asia

Had the U.S. stayed out of Indochina, it might have had to intervene in the Philippines at greater cost.

By William Lloyd Stearman

America got into World War II because of Vietnam. When the Japanese conquered what was then French Indochina in September 1941, the U.S. replied with severe economic sanctions, which convinced the Japanese that America was hostile and might use its fleet to block Tokyo's conquest of Southeast Asia. In December the Japanese attacked the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor.

President Dwight Eisenhower, remembering that Indochina had been a base for conquest, declared on April 7, 1954, that a communist victory there could topple the newly independent countries of Southeast Asia like dominoes. The containment strategy against Soviet communism dictated that Washington prevent this. U.S. involvement in Vietnam followed, step by step.

The military presence began with advisers, whose numbers continued to grow. When the threat from North Vietnam increased in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson decided to introduce combat troops—first Marines, then a far greater number of soldiers.

Things seemed to be progressing well until the Tet Offensive of Jan. 30, 1968, in which North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces attacked much of South Vietnam. Even the U.S. Embassy grounds were occupied. Negative television coverage had a decisive effect on U.S. public opinion—yet the offensive ended badly for the communists. Hanoi was delighted that the U.S. media had turned its defeat into victory.

President Richard Nixon began “Vietnamizing” the war in 1969 by withdrawing combat ground troops. This phase was largely completed in 1971. America did, however, continue to provide air, naval and logistical support and advisers. On March 30, 1972, Hanoi staged a huge offensive aimed at final victory. Initially it seemed certain to succeed. But with massive U.S. air support and good advice, South Vietnamese troops were soon on the offensive. By autumn, “on the ground in South Vietnam the war had been won,” former CIA Director William Colby wrote in his 1989 book, “Lost Victory.”

Hanoi thus asked for negotiations, which interfered with continued fighting. The war ended with the Jan. 27, 1973, Paris Peace Agreement, which was immediately met with gross violations, mostly by the communist side.

After U.S. troops and prisoners of war returned, Americans lost interest in South Vietnam's fate. Congress greatly reduced aid and banned further U.S. military involvement in the region, effectively ensuring a communist victory. Saigon fell April 30, 1975.

It is widely believed that the Vietnam War was unwinnable. But a 2004 History Chanel documentary featured interviews with knowledgeable North Vietnamese who thought otherwise. They said U.S. and South Vietnamese ground troops could have effectively blocked the Ho Chi Minh Trail in eastern Laos, denying its enemy essential supplies and troop reinforcements. Other North Vietnamese said they were puzzled that the U.S. failed to do so. This logical, war-ending move was ruled out by decision makers in Washington because it would “broaden the conflict”—never mind that the enemy had already broadened it by using Laos as a base and supply chain.

The defeat created more than a million South Vietnamese refugees, who escaped by sea. More than 300,000 drowned, according to a Red Cross estimate. Large numbers also died in concentration camps or were executed.

Yet even the defeat in Vietnam accomplished a lot. “In 1965, when the U.S. military moved massively into South Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines faced internal threats from armed insurgencies and the communist underground was still active in Singapore. Indonesia [was] in the throes of a failed communist coup,” Singapore’s founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, wrote in his 2000 memoir, “From Third World to First.” “America’s action enabled noncommunist Southeast Asia to put their own houses in order. By 1975, they were in better shape to stand up to the communists. Had there been no U.S. intervention, the will of these countries to resist them would have melted and Southeast Asia would most likely gone communist.”

The 1965 combat-troop buildup had a bracing effect in Southeast Asia. It reportedly encouraged the British defense of Malaysia. Far more important was its effect in Indonesia. In 1970, President Suharto told U.S. officials and columnist Robert Novak that the large-scale introduction of combat troops substantially encouraged Indonesian forces to repulse a major, and nearly successful, Chinese-dominated communist coup that began the night of Sept. 30, 1965. Coup assassination squads had already murdered six top generals, and Suharto—then the army’s strategic reserve commander—must have been tempted to flee to safety. Instead, he rallied his units and suppressed the coup.

Had the coup succeeded, it probably would have spread to the Philippines. That would have triggered the 1951 Defense Agreement, which would have obliged the U.S. to help in its defense. Such a conflict might have been far worse than Vietnam. The U.S. intervention in Vietnam achieved a strategic victory by saving Southeast Asia—albeit not Vietnam itself—from communism.

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