# Vietnam Involvement Was a Failure, Not a Folly

By JOHN MUELLER

In her new best-selling book, "The March of Folly," Barbara W. Tuchman assesses several historical instances in which, as she sees it, "folly" was committed: Decision makers acted contrary "to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests." Her most extensively discussed example is the American decision to "betray herself in Vietnam." Successive administrations should have known their policy was doomed to failure, she argues, and had the "moral courage" to reverse course.

With the blessings of hindsight—something Mrs. Tuchman sternly eschews early in her book—we now know that U.S. policy in Vietnam was a tragic mistake. But a decision should not be judged for reasonableness simply according to its success or failure, but according to the process by which it was made. All important decisions contain an irreducible amount of uncertainty and guesswork, and nobody succeeds all the time. What we can sensibly demand of decision makers, whether they be presidents or stock market analysts, is that they carefully assess their values, examine alternatives and pursue the strategy with the best probability of success.

By these standards, the American intervention into the war in Vietnam was far from a case of folly; it may well have been one of the most fully considered, carefully reasoned actions in our history. And thus the gloomy lesson is that failure could have been prevented only by dumb luck, not by more enlightened decision making.

Pivotal, of course, was the decision in 1965 to send vast numbers of American troops to take over the war effort and to prevent what seemed to be an imminent collapse of the South Vietnamese military. This decision process went on for months, and extensive documentation on it is available. The evidence suggests that the leaders did all the right things: They evaluated fundamental values and premises, they assessed possible alternatives and they came up with a strategy with reasonable promise of success.

In 1965 there was a broad consensus, both within the government and without, that Vietnam was, in reporter David Halberstam's assessment at the time, "a strategic country in a key area . . .—one of only five or six nations in the world that is truly vital to U.S. interests." As Mrs. Tuchman observes, this was an extension of the policy of containing international communism that had guided American policy in the postwar era (and still does, for the most part). What she fails to appreciate is that there was a special urgency to Vietnam's position in 1965: Communist China to the north was crowing belligerently about aiding and encouraging other Vietnams around the globe, while the huge island republic of Indonesia to the south was gradually locking itself into a semi-alliance with China. (Within a year or two, after masses of American troops were committed to Vietnam, these conditions were to change radically: There was a violent anti-Communist coup in Indonesia; and China, its foreign policy an almost universal failure, was to turn northward to dispute with the Soviet Union, as well as inward to embark on that bizarre, self-destructive ritual of purification known as the Cultural Revolution. But U.S. decision makers could hardly have known in 1965 that this was going to happen.)

What is impressive about the decision making of 1965 is not that the containment consensus prevailed, but that those holding this view were so willing to entertain fundamental challenges to their position. In a tightly reasoned argument, Undersecretary of State George Ball attacked the application of the containment policy to Vietnam and urged judicious withdrawal. Moreover, Mr. Ball's position, which was far more radical than almost anything heard at the time outside the government, was not stifled at low levels but allowed to percolate to the top; as Mrs. Tuchman observes, Mr. Ball went through the argument point by point with the man ultimately responsible, President Lyndon Johnson.

Mr. Ball's argument was rejected not out of whim or myopia, but because the others decided, after careful reflection, that Vietnam really was a vital interest and that, though risky, the infusion of American troops was the best policy. As part of this consideration, thoughtful assessments were made of the probable U.S. casualty rates over the next couple of years—estimates that proved to be quite accurate. It is doubtful that American decision making upon entering World War II showed such careful, fully rounded consideration of essential values and probable costs.

In all this, the decision makers made one crucial mistake: As Secretary of State Dean Rusk observed in 1971, they "underestimated the resistance and the determination of the North Vietnamese." Mrs. Tuchman ascribes this mistake to "wooden-headedness," but the lessons of the past suggest the misestimation was highly reasonable: The willingness of the Communists to accept punishment in Vietnam was virtually unprecedented in the history of modern warfare.

If one takes the hundreds of participating countries in international and colonial wars since 1816 and calculates for each the battle death rate as a percentage of the pre-war population, it quickly becomes apparent that Vietnam was an extreme case. Even discounting heavily for exaggerations in the "body count," the Communist side was willing to accept battle death rates that were twice as high as those accepted by the fanatical, often suicidal Japanese in World War II. Indeed, the few combatants who took losses as high as the Vietnamese Communists were mainly those such as the Germans and Soviets in World War II who were fighting to the death—for their national existence—not merely for expansion like North Vietnam.

The failure of American decision makers to appreciate the extraordinary fanaticism of the enemy is hardly evidence of "wooden-headedness." Mrs. Tuchman suggests the U.S. should have taken the warnings of various French leaders on this issue. But French military history in the last century or so, fraught with inept leadership, precipitous collapse and mutiny, hardly made the advice seem very credible. Anyway, even the French had been able to control the area for decades against local resistance, and in 1954 they had been able to get the Communists in Indochina to accept a peaceful partition, a reasonable half loaf, after inflicting casualties vastly lower than those delivered by the Americans a decade later. Moreover there were many relevant instances of successful wars against Communist insurgencies: In Malaya in 1960, in the Philippines in 1954, in Greece in 1949, dedicated Communist forces gave up or faded away after being substantially battered; why would one necessarily expect the Vietnamese Communists to be different?

Thus the war can be condemned as a mistake, but not a "folly." Decision makers knew what they were doing, often reassessed their premises, compared possible policy alternatives and tried their best to predict the outcome. If there was "folly," it was in Hanoi where the leadership (made "paranoid" by U.S. bombing, explains Mrs. Tuchman) relentlessly sent its youth to the south to be ground up by the American war machine without, it appears, a serious evaluation of the relationship between potential gain and inevitable cost, or of alternative, less costly strategies.

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