REFLECTIONS ON THE VIETNAM ANTIWAR MOVEMENT AND ON THE CURIOUS CALM AT THE WAR'S END[1]

by John Mueller

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One of the most memorable aspects of the Vietnam War was the rise within the United States of a large, vocal movement in opposition to the war, or to American participation in it. The movement collected enormous press attention during its years of existence and has inspired something of a folklore since.

This paper presents some disconnected speculations about the effect of the Vietnam antiwar movement on public opinion, political elections, American Vietnam policy, and North Vietnamese strategy. It concludes with some observations about the unexpected calm with which the American public accepted the ending of the tumultuous war in 1975.

The Antiwar Movement

Some years ago I did a study comparing public opinion on the war in Vietnam with public opinion on the Korean War. Using various tests I found that, although television supposedly made Vietnam somehow unique, the wars actually affected public opinion quite similarly. Both wars were supported by the same demographic groups: the young and the well-educated, in particular. Sentiment for withdrawal and escalation was about the same and mostly came from the same groups. Moreover, the wars were about equally popular during the periods in which they were comparable; that is, while the war in Vietnam eventually became more unpopular than the Korean War, it became so only after American casualties there had substantially surpassed those of the earlier war. Trends in support for the wars followed the same course: basic support declined as U.S. casualties increased, and it did so according to the same mathematical relationship.[2]

This similarity seems surprising because, while the two wars had many things in common, the Korean War inspired no organized public protest remotely comparable to the one generated during the Vietnam War. If one paid attention to vocal protest and to media reports about that protest during the two wars, it would certainly seem the later war was far more unpopular.

It seems to me these findings suggest two cautions about assessing vocal protest. The first is fairly obvious: One should be careful about assuming vocal agitators necessarily represent the masses they purport to speak for. Labor union leaders may not speak for workers, active

[1] There have been some changes of headings and subheadings in this version from those in the book.

[2] John Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973), chs. 2-6. See also "Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam" elsewhere in this volume.

feminists may not accurately represent women, and the Moral Majority may, as the bumper sticker suggests, be neither.

Second, and perhaps more interestingly, it may be that the Vietnam protest movement, at least through 1968, actually was somewhat counter-productive in its efforts to influence public opinion—that is, the war might have been somewhat more unpopular had the protest not existed.

The reasoning behind this latter suggestion is developed from a well-known public opinion phenomenon. Many people, in making up their minds on an issue, are not influenced so much by its substance as by its endorsers. If an issue comes up and if Franklin Roosevelt is for it and if, in general, I find myself in agreement with Roosevelt and trust him, it is reasonable for me to adopt his view as my own, at least as a first approximation.

This endorsement procedure, with its obvious efficiencies, can work both ways. An endorser with negative vibrations can decrease the acceptance of an issue. For example, in 1940, if the name of the then-controversial Charles Lindbergh was associated with a proposal to be nice to the Germans, support for the proposal dropped considerably.[3]

Now, as it happened, the Vietnam protest movement generated negative feelings among the American public to an all but unprecedented degree. In a poll conducted by the University of Michigan in 1968, the public was asked to place various groups and personalities on a 100-point scale. Fully one-third of the respondents gave Vietnam War protesters a zero, the lowest possible rating, while only 16 percent put them anywhere in the upper half of the scale. Other studies suggest that popular reaction to the disturbances surrounding the Democratic convention of 1968 was overwhelmingly favorable to the Chicago police and unfavorable to the demonstrators, despite press coverage that was heavily biased in the demonstrators' favor.[4] Opposition to the war came to be associated with violent disruption, stink bombs, desecration of the flag, profanity, and contempt for American values. Not only would these associations tend to affect public opinion in a negative way, they also would tend to frighten away more "respectable" would-be war opponents from joining the cause.

The Antiwar Movement and Political Elections

In addition to its efforts to influence public opinion on the war, the Vietnam protest movement was concerned with electing candidates it approved. Although friendly candidates did do well here and there, particularly in some primaries, and, although some local antiwar referendums were passed, it does not appear the movement was very successful in this effort. Even the massive efforts to influence the congressional elections of 1970 in the wake of the Cambodian invasion do not appear to have shifted many seats.

In presidential elections, however, the protest movement may have had some impact: It may have been instrumental in electing Richard Nixon. Twice.

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[3] Hadley Cantril, *Gauging Public Opinion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 41.
[4] John P. Robinson, "Public Reaction to Political Protest: Chicago 1968," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Spring 1970, pp. 1-9.

In 1968, the alternative to Nixon was Hubert Humphrey. In rage over the fate of antiwar candidates such as Eugene McCarthy during the Democratic primaries and convention, the protest movement—or at least its most vocal elements—concentrated on assuring the defeat of Humphrey, the man it saw as the legatee of Lyndon Johnson's policies and as an important co-author of the Vietnam War.

This is an understandable point of view and, while Humphrey later sought to demonstrate his many misgivings about Johnson's policies in Vietnam, it would have been difficult for the protesters to have known that in 1968. However, even granting that point, the alternative in the election was Nixon, a man who had rigidly supported the war effort and had a long record in favor of escalation and militant anti-communism. Humphrey, on the other hand, had long supported international negotiation, arms control, conciliation. Their verbal policies in 1968 may not have differed much (Humphrey obviously could not afford to alienate the Johnson wing of the party during the election), but their instincts about issues of war and peace were clearly on the public record.

The protest movement not only chose to ignore these well-documented differences, but also actively sought to humiliate and defeat Humphrey. When the Vice President campaigned in Chicago he was greeted by "Dump-the-Hump" clamor and chaos; when Nixon ventured there he came as the prince of peace and could draw the lesson that his election would return tranquility to the streets of America.

Amazingly, despite all his problems, Humphrey almost won the election. Many war opponents in the party joined up at the end, but their support was grudging, belittling, and too late. Others sat on their hands. The margin was enough to send Nixon to the White House.

Four years later the machinery of the Democratic party was largely in the hands of the antiwar element. It changed the rules to avoid the debacle of 1968 and committed another one: the nomination of George McGovern, the worst presidential candidate any party has put forward in modern times. McGovern managed to do the seemingly impossible: He gained a lower percentage of the popular vote than Barry Goldwater had in 1964, even though McGovern represented the majority party and even though he was up against a candidate who, though difficult to defeat, was far less popular and far more vulnerable than Goldwater's opponent, Lyndon Johnson, had been in 1964.

The Antiwar Movement and Vietnam Policy

The impact of the antiwar movement on American policy and policy-makers seems to be fairly limited, especially through 1968. Perhaps Lyndon Johnson's efforts at negotiations were increased by the rancor at home, but, since these efforts led to little until 1968, that is not much of an achievement.

There probably was some atmospheric impact of the peace movement on the various changes in American policy that took place in the post-Tet spring of 1968. But the accounts of major participants like Johnson and Clark Clifford, as well as the general histories of the period such as Herbert Schandler's, tend to suggest these changes perhaps even Johnson's decision not to run

again—were fairly likely to have come about for reasons that have little to do with the protest at home.[5]

The antiwar movement probably had a greater impact later, in the Nixon era. Of all the major party presidential possibilities of 1968 (including even Johnson), Nixon was probably the one most reluctant to relax the military presence in Vietnam, to withdraw U. S. troops, to make central concessions in negotiations, to want to see the nation "accept the first defeat in its history." The antiwar movement may have been influential in getting Nixon to speed up troop withdrawals somewhat and in causing him to pull back from the Cambodian incursion a bit earlier than planned. Certainly memoirs by Nixon and by foreign policy adviser Henry Kissinger suggest a considerable preoccupation with the opposition movement. It seems of interest that when Nixon felt he had to do some punishment bombing of North Vietnam in 1971, he chose to do it at the only time of the year when he could guarantee American colleges would be deserted: between Christmas and New Year's.

But it should also be kept in mind that the antiwar movement became considerably broader after Nixon's election. In particular, many liberal Democrats who had supported the war out of loyalty to the Johnson administration were released by the election from this commitment and could move toward opposition to what quickly began to become "Nixon's war." Moreover, twin developments--the increasing costs of the war and the declining importance of South Vietnam in containment theory (due to threat-moderating changes in Indonesia and China in the late 1960s)—caused disillusion with the war.[6] Thus, while elements remained from its earlier, more romantic past, the antiwar movement came to be dominated by more respectable types--including even Hubert Humphrey, in fact. It was quite a different animal in that era and its demands were more likely to be effective. The most consequential antiwar measures, the war powers restraints enacted by Congress in 1973, were adopted long after the antiwar movement had ceased to exist as a street phenomenon.

Some of the movement's ineffectiveness, particularly in the 1965-1968 period, may have been due to the way it dealt with the issues. Most of the protest seemed to be directed toward getting negotiations going, and a prerequisite for that, according to North Vietnam, was that all bombing of its territory be halted unconditionally. For the most part the issue between the administration and the war protesters was never met, because the antiwar movement kept asking for a bombing

[5] Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York: Holt, 1971), Clark Clifford, "A Viet Nam Reappraisal," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1969, Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

[6] Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts argue in their important *The Irony of Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1979) that the postwar consensus on containing communism broke down between 1965 and 1968 through disillusionment over the costs of the war (see also Richard K. Betts, "Misadventure Revisited," *The Wilson Quarterly*, Summer 1983, p. 105). But it should be added that at the same time the threat of communism in Southeast Asia, and therefore the value of containing communism in Vietnam, had decreased dramatically; Indonesia no longer seemed on the brink of communism due to the coup of 1965-66, and China had turned inward on its self-destructive Cultural Revolution. On this "devitalization" of Vietnam, see John Mueller, "Vietnam Revised," *Armed Forces and Society*, December 1982.

halt to "get negotiations going" and simply ignored the Communists' demand that the halt must be unconditional.

In some respects, in fact, the antiwar movement may have inadvertently played into the hands of those within the administration who favored bombing. By constantly stressing that the bombing was doing tremendous damage and killing "innocent civilians," the protesters suggested the bombing was militarily potent. Proponents of bombing were thus bolstered in their contention that the enemy was "hurting" because of the bombing, and to counter the argument about "innocent civilians," could say that efforts would be made to reduce "collateral damage." In addition some may have argued internally that no civilian in a totally mobilized country like North Vietnam was innocent anyway and therefore that civilian casualties were all to the good.

An argument likely to have been far more effective with members of the administration would have been to stress the costs of the bombing in American lives and dollars. When disillusionment with the bombing occurred inside the establishment, it mostly came from the realization that the bombing was ineffective militarily—that meaningful targets were few in number, very difficult to destroy with bombs, and easily repaired or compensated for when damaged. Thus the bombing was not having enough effect on the Communist war effort, particularly in the North, to justify the cost in planes and pilots.(7)[7] Robert McNamara and other defense planners were among those most impressed by this dawning realization, but this potent argument was only occasionally emphasized by the antiwar movement, caught up as it was in rhetoric about the murderousness of American pilots and the innocence of the enemy.

The Antiwar Movement and North Vietnam's Strategy

It is often maintained by supporters of the Vietnam War that the antiwar movement strengthened the will of the Communists to continue the war, and thus that the war protest had the effect of prolonging the war.[8]

The war, as General William Westmoreland often observed, was a war of attrition, a "war of will" in which each side would punish the other until one finally caved in, (His analysis seems to have been generally correct, though the war didn't come out the way he intended.) Thus the ability to maintain morale was especially important in this war.

It seems likely the war protest in the United States was encouraging to Hanoi, even as the absence of signs of war opposition in North Vietnam was discouraging to Washington. At least one Communist leader in Vietnam has, in fact, admitted this in a postwar interview shown on public television.[9] The crucial consideration, however, is not whether the war protest was encouraging to the Communists but whether that encouragement was important to their ability to continue their war effort. All the evidence on this issue is not in, but it seems likely the North

[7] See Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much is Enough?* (New York: Harper, 1971), ch. 8.
[8] For example, Paul Nitze in William S. Thompson and D. D. Frizzell (eds), *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977), p. 6. See also Allan E. Goodman, *The Lost Peace* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), p. 116.
[9] On the series, "Vietnam: The 10,000 Day War."

Vietnamese were prepared to continue the war for as long as necessary regardless of how much encouraging opposition there was in the United States.

The mechanisms used to build and maintain morale both in the North and, more importantly, on the battlefield in the South, relied on organizational and political skills that had little to do with news from foreign locales. In the course of the war the Communists probably suffered more battle deaths as a percentage of population than virtually any country in the last 160 years, and they seem to have been psychologically committed to continuing that conflict for a long time—even decades.[10] Indeed, today, more than eight years after their victory in the South, they continue to fight without let-up against new enemies in Indochina. A commitment to prolonged war seems to have been an essential part of their psychological make-up well before the antiwar movement came into being.

The Acceptance of Defeat

The antiwar movement faded as American troops were withdrawn from Vietnam and it was scarcely an element on the political scene in 1975 when American foreign policy in Indochina ended in debacle as U.S-supported governments collapsed ignominiously under Communist attacks. During the war many supporters of the war had warned that a Communist takeover in the area would, among other things, cause widespread political ramifications within the United States—the rise of a new McCarthyism, for example, since the old McCarthyism often seemed to have been impelled by the "fall" of China to Communism in 1949.[11]

Contrary to such dire predictions, the collapse in Southeast Asia was greeted with remarkable equanimity by the American public and there was very little debate over "who lost Vietnam." Most amazingly, the man who presided over the debacle, President Gerald Ford, actually used the events in Indochina as a point in his favor when running for re-election in 1976: "When I came into office in 1974," he repeatedly argued, "we were still involved in a war in Southeast Asia; now we are blissfully at peace." His challenger, Jimmy Carter, seems to have concluded it was disadvantageous to point out the essential absurdity of Ford's argument.

I would like to suggest there were at least three reasons why the public found it so easy to accept the collapse of 1975.

[10] The Communist battle death percentage in Vietnam was twice that of the Japanese in World War II. For a discussion of these issues, see John Mueller, "The Search for the 'Breaking Point' in Vietnam," *International Studies Quarterly*, December 1980, pp. 497-519. Commentators who suggest North Vietnam was desperate after the Christmas bombings of 1972 and on the verge of collapse need to supply convincing evidence not that the damage was extensive, but that the Communists' "breaking point" was reached—that they were no longer willing to recoup losses as they had after costly ventures in the past, and that they were finally about to abandon their fanatical commitment to protracted warfare.

[11] An imperfect analogy. The reaction in the early 1950s was not simply to the Communist success in China in 1949, but to the fact that a year later the United States found itself at war with Communist China in Korea.

First, to a considerable degree the war had become decoupled from American sensibilities by the settlement of January 1973; that is, there had been a "decent interval" of two years during which the war had seemingly been given back to the Indochinese.

Crucial to this development was the return of the American prisoners of war in early 1973. It is often suggested that Vietnam differed from other wars in that there was never a glorious homecoming for the returning soldier-heroes. But for this small group of men there was an emotional and well-publicized homecoming, and their return constituted a highly visible end to the war for the public.[12]

The importance of the prisoner-of-war issue to American identification with the war should not be underestimated. In May 1971, a public opinion poll asked if American troops should be withdrawn from Vietnam by the end of the year; 68 percent agreed. When asked if they would still favor withdrawal if such an action would mean "a Communist takeover of South Vietnam," only 29 percent of the respondents agreed. When asked if they approved withdrawal "even if it threatened [not cost] the lives or safety of United States POWs held by North Vietnam," support evaporated: only 11 percent agreed.[13]

This visceral public attitude was generally well appreciated by politicians (except, perhaps, by George McGovern), and the political necessity of winning release for the POWs helped keep the peace talks—and American participation in the war dragging on for years. Rationally, one might question a policy of spending thousands of lives to save hundreds of prisoners, but to a considerable degree, there was no choice.[14] However, once the prisoners returned and this issue was disposed of, the war could quickly be forgotten.[15]

Second, since the Cold War importance of South Vietnam diminished greatly after 1965, as suggested above, the chief reason to reinsert U.S. troops into the war in 1975 was to save or to defend the South Vietnamese. But poll evidence demonstrates that the American public viewed the South Vietnamese with considerable disrespect, even contempt, and the public had long been prepared to abandon them if they could not effectively fight for themselves. This could be seen as early as 1966. At that time some 15 to 35 percent of the public favored withdrawal from Vietnam; but this percentage lumped to 54 percent when the poll question was phrased to include

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[12] As an example of the thoroughness with which this decoupling has been accepted, Harrison Salisbury opened a conference on Vietnam in 1983 by declaring, "It's 10 years down the line since the war came to its halting end." ("On Reopening a Chapter," *The Journalist*, May 1983, p. 6).

[13] Opinion Research Corporation release, May 8, 1971.

[14] The utter necessity of getting the prisoners back is suggested by Henry Kissinger in his review of the options in the Vietnam negotiations. "Unilateral withdrawal ... would not do the trick; it would leave our prisoners in Hanoi's hands"; and "Vietnamization pursued to the end would not return our prisoners" (*White House Years*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1979, pp. 1011, 1039). The option of ending the war without the return of the prisoners seems not to have been even a theoretical consideration.

[15] The emotional attachment to prisoners of war has often been a dominant theme in American history. The issue was central to the lengthy peace talks in the Korean War, and outrage at the fate of American POWs on Bataan intensified hatred for the Japanese during World War 11 almost as much as the attack on Pearl Harbor. Another case in point is the almost total preoccupation by politicians and press with the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979-81, to the virtual exclusion of issues and events likely to be of far greater import historically.

the condition “suppose the South Vietnamese start fighting among themselves,” and to 72 percent when it included the phrase, “if the South Vietnamese government decides to stop fighting.” Other polls suggest the commitment to the South Vietnamese and fear of a postwar blood bath in Vietnam were relatively minor elements in popular support for the war.

Third, the collapse in Indochina was probably made easier to accept by an ancillary, if essentially insignificant, event: the capture in 1975 of the American ship Mayaguez by Cambodian Communists and its subsequent daring recapture by American troops. Although it cost about as many lives to rescue the ship as there were sailors aboard, the drama and macho derring-do of the venture probably served to mollify American anguish. It was possible to believe that, while the Communists could defeat our erstwhile allies in Southeast Asia, they were impotent against true American might.