

Vietnam: Time to Lose a War

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So Richard Nixon will continue the Vietnam conflict. He is reported to have said he will not be 'the first American president to lose a war'. The remark is a chilling reminder of the level at which the world's most powerful executive thinks. There is a schoolboy ring about it. Politicians should always avoid absolute statements, which are certain to be swiftly falsified by events. Mr Churchill did not 'become Prime Minister to preside over the dissolution of the British empire'; but that dissolution proceeded as steadily under his administration as under Mr Attlee's. A Tory minister, whose name few people could now recall, promised that Britain would 'never' surrender sovereignty over Cyprus; in no time at all Archbishop Makarios was smiling benignantly from Government House. Political leaders should resist the temptation to see themselves in historical perspective, which they are sure to misjudge. Mr Nixon, at the rate he is going, is likely to be condemned by history for matters quite unrelated to the Vietnam War, which in any event is not 'his' war at all; it was General Eisenhower who first involved America in Vietnam; Mr Kennedy who undertook a military commitment there, and Mr Johnson who gambled America's prestige on a victory. If Mr Nixon were to end the war, on whatever terms he could get, it is probable he would earn the approval of historians, rather than their censure.

For the first quality of statesmanship is surely the enlightened recognition of national interest. In comparison with this, victory or defeat, prestige or humiliation, are mere words, to be blown away like autumn leaves by the winds of history. Let Mr Nixon ask himself two simple questions: would his country's security and independence be increased by a victory in Vietnam? Would they be diminished by withdrawal? The answer in both cases is no. The stigma of defeat is self-imposed by American official rhetoric. Far more damaging to America is the evidence of political and military miscalculation which the whole course of her involvement supplies, and by the irresolution which Mr Nixon shows even at this late hour. America's ability to influence the world is likely to be strengthened by her recognition, however belated, of the facts of life in South East Asia. Nations achieve maturity not by military prowess but by forbearance, for it is rightly recognised as a sign of self-confidence. Mr Attlee's decision to give India her independence, which brought him 'patriotic' abuse at the time, is now universally recognised as an act of wisdom. Which Frenchman in his senses would now criticise Mendès-France for withdrawing from Indo-China, or De Gaulle for conceding liberty to the Algerians?

The refusal of many Americans to accept the inevitable in Vietnam comes oddly from a people who owe their very existence, as a nation, to Britain's recognition in 1783 that

military victory and national self-interest are not always synonymous and may be mutually incompatible. There are some curious and illuminating parallels between the Vietnam War and the War of Independence. In both cases the imperial power justified the use of force to deny na-

tional independence not in a local, but in a global context. Today the Americans see a communist victory in Vietnam as significant, not in itself, but as part of a continuous erosive process which will ultimately engulf the entire 'Free World'. Vietnam alone, they say, is not worth a war, but where will it all end? It is interesting that George III also had his domino theory, which he outlined in a letter to Lord North on 11 June 1779. It is worth quoting because it evokes so many echoes of White House pronouncements on Vietnam; indeed, suitably updated - and translated into the sham-Lincolnian prose so beloved of Washington scriptwriters - it could have been delivered by Mr Nixon himself on Monday:

I should think it the greatest instance among the many I have met with of ingratitude and injustice, if it could be supposed that any man in my dominions more ardently desired the restoration of peace and solid happiness in every part of the empire than I do; there is no personal sacrifice I could not readily yield for so desirable an object; but at the same time no inclination to get out of the present difficulties, which certainly keeps my mind from a state of ease, can incline me to enter into what I look upon as the destruction of the empire. I have heard Lord North frequently drop that the advantages to be gained by this contest could never repay the expense; I own that, let any war be ever so successful, if persons will sit down and weigh the expenses, they will find, as in the last, that it has impoverished the state, enriched individuals, and perhaps raised the name only of the conquerors; but this is only weighing such events in the scale of a tradesman behind his counter; it is necessary for those in the station it has pleased Divine Providence to place me, to weigh whether expenses, though very great, are not sometimes necessary to prevent what might be more ruinous to a country than the loss of money. The present contest with America I cannot help seeing as the most serious in which any country was ever engaged; it contains such a train of consequences that they must be examined to feel its real weight. Whether the laying of a tax was deserving all the evils that have arisen from it I should suppose no man could allege without being thought more fit for Bedlam than a seat in the Senate; but step by step the demands of America have risen; independence is their object; that certainly is one which every man not willing to sacrifice every object to a momentary and inglorious peace must concur with me in thinking that this country can never submit to: should America succeed in that, the West Indies must follow them . . . Ireland would soon follow the same plan and be a separate state; then this island would be reduced to itself, and soon would be a poor island indeed, for, reduced in her

trade, merchants would retire with their wealth to climates more to their advantage, and shoals of manufacturers would leave this country for the new empire. These self-evident consequences are not worse than what can arise should the Almighty permit every event to turn to our disadvantage; consequently this country has but one sensible, one great line to follow, the being ever ready to make peace when to be obtained without submitting to terms that in their consequences must annihilate this empire, and with firmness to make every effort to deserve success.

Here are all the familiar characteristics of

the hawk: professions of a peaceful disposition; ritual denunciation of war; willingness to negotiate about everything - except the substance; claims to reasonableness as contrasted with utter intransigence of one's opponents - the Americans actually had the nerve to want independence!; absence of any sense of proportion - the war was 'the most serious in which any country was ever engaged'; prophecies of cosmic doom unless military victory is secured (Governor Reagan, I see, believes defeat in Vietnam could lead to 'a thousand years of darkness for unborn generations'); and finally the use of the term 'firmness' as a euphemism for escalation. It is interesting to note, too, that King George, like many US hawks today, stressed the very size and power of his country as an additional reason for not conceding defeat. In another letter he writes that he 'could never suppose this country so far lost to all ideas of self-importance' as to grant America independence, for then it would 'fall into a very low class among the European states'. Or, as he put it again, 'The giving up the game would be total ruin, a small state may certainly subsist but a great mouldering one cannot get into an inferior situation but must be annihilated.' Depressingly little has changed in imperial delusions over the past two centuries. George III is alive and well, and living in Washington.

The same forces which are now driving America to peace operated in late-18th-century Britain: the growth of a responsible opposition to the war and the evident popularity of a peace policy among the electorate; a recognition that the cost was intolerable; above all, a realisation that, even if technical military victory were secured, vast forces would be required indefinitely to hold down a hostile population. King George was forced to yield by political and economic as much as by military facts. Yet once American independence was conceded, all the hawkish predictions were soon seen to be wholly unfounded. Well might Lord Shelburne, the British negotiator at Versailles, claim: 'We prefer trade to dominion.' This was not just a defiant rationalisation but a statement of fact soon recognised as obvious. As it happened, the severing of the link with America coincided with the beginning of an unprecedented period of British economic, industrial and technological supremacy. As Mr C. J. Bartlett points out in his editorial introduction to *Britain Pre-Eminent; Studies in British World Influence in the 19th Century* (Macmillan, 40s):

Posterity was to note that 1776 was not only the year of the Declaration of American Independence, but also of the publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*: that in 1781 a British army may have capitulated at Yorktown, but that James Watt perfected the rotary motion in the same year; and that 1783 witnessed both the Peace of Versailles and Cort's construction of a puddling furnace.

I suspect that, in a comparatively short time, people will find the blind intransigence of American policy-makers in Vietnam as baffling and incomprehensible as the obstinacy of old King George. He thought he was fighting the Americans in the name of commerce; in fact, by doing so, he was impeding its development. The US hawks think they are fighting the Vietnamese to halt the spread of communism in Asia; even today, most sensible people have a shrewd suspicion that America's actions, if anything,

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are giving communism a helping hand: what is likely to be the judgment in 10 or 20 years' time? The truth is that the ostensible justifications for war are nearly always the rationalisation of egregious folly. Horace Walpole, reflecting on the vainglorious conflicts of the 18th century, made the point for all time:

I am a bad Englishman, because I think the advantages of commerce are dearly bought for some by the lives of many more . . . But . . . every age has some ostentatious system to excuse the havoc it commits. Conquest,

honour, chivalry, religion, balance of power, commerce, no matter what, mankind must bleed, and take a term for a reason.

Who now would claim that Walpole was a 'bad Englishman'? He looks, in retrospect, like a good and sensible one. Americans who oppose the Vietnam War are 'bad' in the nursery vernacular of unreconstructed patriotism: but those who love America will wish her many, many more of them. Indeed, what America needs more than anything else - for her own future and for the future of all of us - is 'the first President to lose a war'.