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What Went Wrong?

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ESSAY

WASHINGTON—In 1969, President Thieu met with President Nixon on Midway Island to announce the beginning of America's troop withdrawals from Vietnam. In private conversation before the two leaders went out to face the cameras, Mr. Nixon told General Thieu: "I would not like to be breaking the umbilical cord to your people."

The South Vietnamese leader moved to reassure the American President, who obviously felt guilty about doing what he knew was necessary, and replied: "No, we have been saying for years we have been getting stronger. And if that is the case, then we have to be willing to see some Americans leave."

In that spirit, "Vietnamization" began; a half-million U.S. troops were replaced by South Vietnamese soldiers and a peace accord was signed; now, with all lost, the departing President Thieu speaks of the United States as "inhuman" and "untrustworthy."

What went wrong in Vietnam? Why are guilt-edged doves pointing fingers of blame at resentful hawks who point fingers of blame at them?

The first thing that went wrong in Vietnam was when we decided that there was no way to "win" without starting World War III. As we later learned from the Soviet lack of response to the mining of Haiphong harbor and the bombing of Hanoi, the Goldwater strategy of 1964 made a lot of sense and the Johnson strategy of gradual escalation was disastrous.

The second thing that went wrong was that the Nixon Administration assumed in good faith that the North Vietnamese would settle for anything less than total victory. A week after the 1973 peace agreement, I asked Henry Kissinger what he would have done if we had the four years to live over, and he replied: "We should have bombed the hell out of them the minute we got into office." More thoughtfully, he added: "The North Vietnamese started an offensive in February 1969. We should have responded strongly. We should have taken on the doves right then—started bombing and mining the harbors. The war would have been over in 1970."

The third thing that went wrong was that the American President who was capable of keeping the North Vietnamese peacefully intimidated became impotent in 1973, and was unable to marshal public support to resist the tide of American isolationism which ultimately invited the final North Vietnamese assault.

Despite the foregoing, South Vietnam had been given what America had promised it: a "reasonable chance to survive." True, the announced intention of the U.S. not to intervene to enforce the Paris peace accords was a weakener; and the cutback of military aid that had been promised and announced in early 1973 did not help.

But the collapse of South Vietnam's anti-Communist Government was not induced by United States perfidy; the central fact about Mr. Thieu's downfall —what suddenly went wrong—was that he committed a strategic blunder which led to a panic and then to political disintegration. The army—which had been a pretty good fighting force for a long time—was not good enough to roll with a blunder, to recover confidence in the face of mysterious orders and uncertainty at the top.

So the Government of President Thieu came apart. Against a determined and well-supplied enemy, the South Vietnamese could not "hack it." But we were not wrong to hope they could.

As our allies surrender, we would do well to put aside the inclination to hate the losers, or to discuss their leader as a "corrupt dictator" as bad as the invading Communists, or to take cheap shots at a distraught human being lashing out in his bitterness.

Though we went about it in the wrong way, we were right to try to help South Vietnam defend itself against invasion. We were right, too, to extricate our troops honorably, over a period of time, for the purpose of giving an ally its "reasonable chance."

What we could not give them was the good generalship and the fierce discipline of their enemies, or a firm guarantee of unwavering support, and so they lost the war. The South Vietnamese read as much strength as possible into our pledges as we left, just as we read as much strength as possible into their army.

In sifting "what went wrong," we need not flagellate ourselves as imperialist aggressors or mad bombers, or make President Thieu our scapegoat. For fifteen years, we were the umbilical cord to a people fighting to resist takeover, at enormous cost in blood and treasure; must we berate ourselves now for not having been sensibly selfish?

Every umbilical cord, by its nature, is temporary; it is ironic that Mr. Nixon chose that metaphor. We did almost all we could; a twist of political fate here and a military blunder there intervened. In the end, it was up to the South Vietnamese, but after a generation's bloodletting, they were just not up to any more.