

No End of A Lesson:

II

PART I
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When we learned about the Thirty Years War in school, its origins seemed beyond understanding. To go on so long, to devastate the center of Europe for reasons of theology and dynasty—it was some 17th century lunacy.

Now, toward the end of the 20th century, we are finishing a thirty years war. That is how long the Vietnamese have been fighting. And for most of that war, and most of the incredible suffering that resulted, the United States was responsible. Will school children in the future be able to understand it? Can we understand ourselves? If we hope to avoid repeating what went wrong, we have to try.

An accident of history played a part at the beginning. President Roosevelt was determined not to let the French resume their colonial role in Indochina;

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but he was dead when the French, with our acquiescence, marched back in the summer of 1945. Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam independent, using Jefferson's words. The French attacked his Saigon headquarters, but Ho escaped. In November, 1946, the French bombarded Haiphong, killing 6,000 people. The war was on.

On May 8, 1950, the U. S. Government decided to help the French in their Indochina war. President Truman and Secretary of State Acheson were doubtless moved to that decision, in part, by the political attack they were undergoing for "losing" China to the Communists.

By 1954, the United States was paying 78 per cent of France's war budget. On May 8 of that year the French were defeated at Dienbienphu. When they decided to pull out, and Ho's government was established in Hanoi, the United States moved in to create and support a separate regime in Saigon. Our chosen instrument, highly touted by American diplomats and journalists, was a politician named Ngo Dinh Diem.

On top of ignorance, presumption. We presumed to tell the South Vietnamese how to order their society. We sent over advisers to build an army and an economy and a government on the American model. And when the result was not American freedom and productivity but corruption and tiger cages, we tried not to notice.

And then, obsession. Whatever did not work, we doubled. More bombs, more defoliants—the means became madly disproportionate to ends that we would not reexamine. And the same in politics, for twenty years we struggled to maintain a right-wing, anti-Communist government in Saigon, preventing coalition, preventing compromise: preventing, as we now can see, a Vietnamese solution.

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The lessons of it all will require books to list and years to explore. But a few are plain enough.

First, America does not have the answers to all the world's problems. We should not really be surprised to discover that our perspective is different from that of a peasant in Southeast Asia. Why should we think that American democracy and capitalism are what he wants? We have come, finally, to realize that Chinese Communism meets China's needs, however little we would like it. We ought now to accept diversity in general—and to stop treating any society's choice of a different model as a provocation.

Second, means cannot be separated from ends; countries, like individuals, must be able to justify both. For a generation, American leaders lied to the public and Congress about Vietnam, telling themselves that it would work better that way. But unprincipled means corrupted our politics as they ravaged Indochina. In the end, correction came when our democratic process was able to function.

Third, pride exacts a terrible price. For years we refused to admit the failure of our disastrous enterprise in Indochina; our politicians and diplomats and generals were afraid of losing face, afraid of being blamed for defeat. But when President Ford said in New Orleans the other night that the war was over for Americans, what a feeling of relief there was—and that feeling would have come years ago if someone else had been willing to say: Enough.

The American feeling now should be one of release, not despair. For if we understand what has happened in Vietnam, we shall know that it did not represent American ideals. We went wrong because we strayed from openness, realism, humanity. We can regain our ideals and our confidence. But understanding comes first.