



What Went Wrong In South Vietnam

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WHAT WENT WRONG in Vietnam? Why are guilt-edged doves pointing fingers of blame at resentful hawks who are pointing the fingers of blame back 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 and the bombings of Hanoi, the Goldwater strategy of 1964 made a lot of sense, and the Johnson strategy of gradual escalation was disastrous.

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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 he 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 taken on the doves right then — start 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.

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 publicly announced in early 1973 did not help.

But the collapse of South Vietnam's anti-Communist government was not induced by U.S. perfidy: the central fact about Thieu's downfall was that he committed a strategic blunder which led to a panic and then to political disintegration.

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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.