

VIETNAM PERSPECTIVE

Miscalculations that made the outcome inevitable
by Robert S. Boyd (Knight News Service)
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How we won--in words

Washington--Here is a year-by-year sampler of optimistic statements by high American officials about Vietnam!

1950--"I think that 150,000 elite French troops should have settled the issue in about four months." General MacArthur.

1951--"The Communist assault in Indochina has been checked." President Truman.

1952--"The tide is now turning in our favor." Sec. of State Dean Acheson.

1953--"In Indochina we believe the tide is now turning." Asst. Sec. of State Walter Robertson.

1954--"I believe success in Indochina will not only be possible but probable." Defense Secy. Charles Wilson.

1955--"South Vietnam has very good chances for success." Army Secy. Wilbur Brucker.

1956--"Vietnam today is progressing rapidly." Asst. Secy. of State Robertson.

1957--"Vietnam has been saved for freedom." President Eisenhower.

1958--"Communist efforts to dominate South Vietnam have entirely failed." President Eisenhower.

1959--"The American aid program in Vietnam has proved an enormous success." Gen. John W. O'Daniel.

1960--"By any measure Vietnam has made great progress." Sen. Mike Mansfield.

1961--"The Communists now realize they can never conquer free Vietnam." Gen. O'Daniel.

1962--"We are going to win in Vietnam." Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

1963--"Victory is in sight." Gen. Paul D. Harkins.

1964--"We have stopped losing the war." Defense Secy. Robert McNamara.

1966--"There can be no doubt of our ultimate success." Vice President Hubert Humphrey.

1968--"We shall not be defeated." President Johnson.

1969--"I think we've certainly turned the corner." Defense Secy. Melvin Laird.

1970--"The war is winding down." President Nixon.

1971--"The Vietnam War has been won." Maj. Gen. George S. Eckhardt.

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1972--"Peace is at hand." Henry Kissinger.

1973--"It has been worthwhile." President Nixon.

1974--"Our men in Vietnam ... finally achieved what many thought was impossible---
peace with honor." President Nixon.

Why did the American side lose the Vietnam War? How did the mightiest power on earth let itself be humiliated by a rag-tag people who still ride ox-carts to work and go to war in sandals?

Historians will be sorting out the answers to those questions for years. They range from tactical military blunders, such as the South Vietnamese Army's botched retreat from the Central Highlands in March, to fundamental historical misjudgments, like President Truman's decision to let the French reoccupy their old colonies in Indochina 30 years ago.

Some experts think the white man's place in Southeast Asia was doomed ever since World War II began to put an end to a century and a half of European domination.

America's first mistake in Vietnam, according to this theory, was to let itself become associated with the French colonialists in 1945-46--and thereby to let Ho Chi Minh's Communists seize the banner of Vietnamese pride and independence.

Nationalism and independence often have been conflicting forces in the 20th century, but when they get together, as in Indochina, they made an almost irresistible combination.

Under Ho's shrewd leadership, the North Vietnamese Communists successfully exploited their countrymen's yearning for national reunification and independence--first against France, later against America.

The government of South Vietnam, under a series of emperors and presidents who couldn't help looking like puppets, simply could not match the Communists' psychological advantage.

This original error was compounded during the years of American involvement. Mistakes included:

The U.S. persistently underestimated the tenacity of the North Vietnamese and overestimated the will and fighting spirit of the Southerners. The historical record is littered with predictions of victory over the Communists that never came true.

Politically, the North Vietnamese adapted international Communism to their own uses, and successfully resisted Russian or Chinese domination. In contrast, the French and Americans foisted alien, Western systems upon the South Vietnamese, who never mastered the knack of collecting taxes, delivering the mail or administering a bureaucracy the way we taught them.

Socially, Americans corrupted South Vietnam by pouring too much wealth into their fragile economy. The Northerners, however, maintained a puritanical life style. Their iron discipline prepared them better for the long struggle than the easy-going Southerners.

Militarily, the U.S. demoralized the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN) by taking over the war in 1965 and treating them as "little brothers" unable to fight their own battles. The North Vietnamese did it differently. They accepted Soviet and Chinese aid at the border, but permitted only a handful of advisers inside. There was no need to "Vietnamize" Hanoi's army, as there was Saigon's.