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### THE INDOCHINA WAR, 1945-1975

#### I. U.S. DECISIONS IN INDOCHINA, 1945-75

- A. 1945-46: the U.S. decides to allow the French to return to Indochina.
- B. 1950: the U.S. starts giving large \$\$\$ and arms backing to France.
- C. 1954-56: the U.S. decides to let the North fall to communism, but to sustain a non-communist Southern state. The U.S. blocks elections in the South. In 1956 342 U.S. military advisers are dispatched to aid Saigon's army.
- D. 1961-1962: more U.S. military advisers go to Vietnam. They total over 9,000 by late 1962.
- E. 1965: Vietcong victory in the South is imminent; the U.S. intervenes massively to avert it. Thus large direct U.S. involvement begins. US starts bombing in February 1965 (Operation "Rolling Thunder") and sends large ground forces in July 1965. U.S. forces in Vietnam peak at 543,000 troops in 1969.
- F. Early 1968: the Communist Tet offensive. The U.S. smashes the attack and badly weakens the Vietcong, but the U.S. public misreads Tet as a sign of American failure.
- G. 1969: the U.S. begins to withdraw and launches "Vietnamization" (i.e., it turns the war over to the South Vietnamese).
- H. 1970: the U.S. widens the war into Cambodia and Laos.
- I. 1973: a peace is agreed. The agreement allows North Vietnamese forces to remain in the South. Later in 1973 the U.S. Congress forbids U.S. bombing throughout Indochina.
- J. 1973-75: both sides break the peace. The U.S. then stands aside as communist forces seize the South and unify Vietnam under Hanoi's rule, April 1975.
- K. Total killed in the Indochina War during 1960-1975: 2,544,000. US dead: 56,000.

#### II. THE FACTUAL AND THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS THAT MOTIVATED AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT

- A. Containment, Version #1: "The U.S. must stop communism in Vietnam to save France and NATO." (1945-48)
  - 1. "France's colonies make her stronger, hence a better contributor to NATO."
  - 2. "We must placate France on Indochina to gain her cooperation in NATO."
- B. Containment, Version #2: "The U.S. must stop communism in Vietnam to contain Soviet (or Chinese) expansion. A communist victory in Vietnam will enhance the Soviet (or Chinese) empire and tilt the global balance of power in their favor."
  - 1. Proxy assumption, 1949-75: Ho Chi Minh as Moscow's (or Beijing's) puppet.
  - 2. Domino theory, in 4 versions, 1953-1965.
    - a. "A communist-controlled Vietnam will send agents across borders to subvert neighbors."
    - b. "A communist-controlled Vietnam will send armies across borders and conquer neighbors."

- c. "A communist victory in Vietnam will inspire revolutions elsewhere in Southeast Asia, by showing that they can succeed, and that the U.S. will let them succeed."
  - d. "A communist victory in Vietnam will position Vietnam to intimidate other Southeast Asian states into submission and alliance with Vietnam."
- 3. Strategic Region assumption, 1950-1965.
  - a. Southeast Asian bases matter; their transfer tips the global balance of power.
  - b. The West depends on Southeast Asian raw materials.
- C. Credibility: "Defeat in Vietnam will destroy the credibility of American threats and promises."
  - 1. Feared effects of lost credibility:
    - a. Others will disbelieve US threats & promises, hence:
      - i. US alliances may disintegrate, because U.S. allies will doubt U.S. assurances, inclining them to cut a deal with the Soviets.
      - ii. The USSR may doubt US resolve in Europe or elsewhere. As a result it may challenge the U.S. at more points; and it may underestimate US resolve and overcommit, causing a U.S.-Soviet war.
      - iii. Nuclear proliferation will increase as states come to mistrust U.S. security guarantees and seek their own means of security.
    - b. Dominoes will fall via intimidation (see II B 2d, above).
    - c. Revolutions will be inspired (see II B 2c above).
  - 2. Credibility arguments passed through three phases:
    - a. Version #1 ("The Soviets are testing us in Vietnam"), 1945-1965.
    - b. Version #2 ("We have promised to defend South Vietnam"), 1961-75.
    - c. Version #3 ("We have paid costs, hence our reputation is engaged"), 1969-75.
  - 3. Prescriptions: John McNaughton ("We must suffer, but needn't win") vs. Henry Kissinger ("We must win").
- D. Domestic Backlash.
  - 1. Electoral Backlash version ("We'll be tossed out of office"), 1949-53, 1965-69.
  - 2. Weimar Analogy version ("the US will suffer a nightmare of recrimination"), 1969-75.
- E. Philanthropy.
  - 1. Bloodbath theory ("Hanoi will slaughter Vietnamese non-communists"), 1969-75.
  - 2. Vietcong Unpopularity assumption ("The VC are unpopular, hence their victory would be an undemocratic outcome"), 1964-75.
  - 3. North Vietnamese Aggression postulate ("This is a war of aggression by North Vietnam against the South; hence a Northern victory would deny the South its right of self-determination"), 1964-75.
- F. "We can win," 1961-64--optimism about the military outcome.

### III. THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT: DID IT FAIL? IF SO, WHY?

#### IV. ARGUMENTS AND EVIDENCE ON THE CASE FOR THE WAR IN RETROSPECT

##### A. Regarding Containment Version #1:

**Doves note** that France's empire was a drain, not an asset; and France needed US cooperation in NATO far more than the US needed France. The US could have compelled French cooperation without appeasing her on Indochina.

##### B. Regarding Containment Version #2, Proxy theory:

**Hawks note** that:

- Hanoi became a loyal Soviet ally, 1979ff. Vietnam gave the Soviets a large naval base at Cam Ranh Bay. The proxy prediction was thus fulfilled.
- The Soviet Union and China gave the Vietnamese Communist movement large aid.

**Doves note** that:

- Ho Chi Minh sought to get the U.S. into the Pacific war in 1941, and later asked the U.S. to make Vietnam an American protectorate, like the Philippines.
- Hanoi was hostile toward China during 1975-91 and aloof toward the Soviet Union during 1975-79. Hanoi did ally with the USSR after 1979, but U.S. and Chinese hostility toward Hanoi explains this alliance. Perhaps the "Proxy" assumption became valid after 1975, but American behavior made it true.
- The power of nationalism trumps ideology in modern times, ensuring that a united Communist Vietnam would be nobody's proxy.

##### C. Regarding Containment Version #2, Domino theory:

**Hawks note** that:

- Cambodia and Laos fell to Communism in 1975. So dominos did topple.
- More Southeast Asian states might have fallen had the US not given them a 10-year breathing space to get their act together. Hanoi revealed its aggressiveness by invading Cambodia in 1979; had its other SE Asian targets been weaker it might have moved further.

**Doves note** that:

- Deduction flunks the cadre version and the conquest version of the domino theory. Subversion was made impossible by the inter-ethnic hatreds of Southeast Asia; and Vietnam lacked the military power to launch a successful regional war of aggression against its major neighbors.
- Not many dominos fell after 1975. The big prizes--Thailand, Malaysia, Burma, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Australia, and Japan--all stood firm.

##### D. Regarding Containment Version #2, Strategic Region assumption: Events don't test this proposition. It could be tested by a simple inventory of the assets of the region.

##### E. Regarding the Credibility theory:

**Hawks note** that the 1975 US defeat was followed by an upsurge of Soviet activity in the Third World during 1975-1980--in Angola, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia.

**Doves note** that:

- Version #2 of the Credibility theory is false because:

- a. The US had no obligation under the SEATO treaty, since that treaty was aimed at international aggression, and the war in South Vietnam was mainly civil.
  - b. The South Vietnamese voided US any obligations by their political corruption and military incompetence.
- Versions #1-#3 of the Credibility theory are falsified by history:
  - a. After 1975 NATO remained strong, and nuclear proliferation didn't happen. And most scholars think that the Soviets didn't infer much from the defeat.
  - b. The Vietnam war itself drained American willpower--see e.g. the "Vietnam syndrome," much lamented by the American right. This syndrome, if real, was a consequence of U.S. involvement in Indochina.
- F. Domestic Backlash:
  - 1. Version #1 is not tested by events, but could be tested by looking at poll data.
  - 2. Version #2 seems falsified by history. When the war ended, it quickly vanished from the consciousness of an American public more interested in Star Trek and disco.
- G. Philanthropy:
  - 1. There was a bloodbath in Cambodia--1.5-2 million were murdered by the communist Khmer Rouge--and millions fled South Vietnam in boats. But there was no mass killing in Vietnam. Doves argue that if the U.S. had left Indochina before 1970 there would have been no bloodbath in Cambodia either. But hawks answer that without U.S. intervention Communism would have spread still more widely in Southeast Asia, and that Communist ideology is prone to bloodbaths.
  - 2. The Vietcong were unpopular after 1975 but probably had significant popularity in South Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s. See, for example, Eisenhower's admission that the Communists would have won a free election in 1956.
  - 3. After 1975 the North Vietnamese took over the South, suppressing all local institutions. No self-determination for Southerners.
- H. Victory was possible. Doves note that the U.S. lost, but hawks claim that victory was in America's grasp in 1968. The Viet Cong were annihilated in the 1968 Tet offensive.

#### V. EXPLAINING U.S. POLICY IN INDOCHINA: SIX CONTENDING EXPLANATIONS

- A. Marxist: "the U.S. sought to protect the global capitalist system."
- B. Realist: "the U.S. sought to avert real threats to its national security."
- C. Realist, misperception variant: "the U.S. sought to avert illusory threats to its national security."
- D. Ego investment: "the war continued once it began because those in charge couldn't admit they were wrong."
- E. Stalemate machine: "each President sought to defer defeat until he was out of office."
- F. Public ignorance: "before 1965 the public knew too little about national security policy, and about Indochina, to make informed choices on Indochina."