

Explaining Vietnam 30 Years Later

Asian Dominoes or U.S. Dominance?

Gareth Porter | May 6, 2005

Thirty years after the last chopper left the Saigon embassy, Americans still don't know why this country fought in Vietnam.

According to the dominant explanation, U.S. policymakers believed unquestioningly in the "domino theory," which held that non-communist countries in Southeast Asia would topple one by one if South Vietnam was lost. According to the conventional reasoning, U.S. policymakers may have exaggerated the communist danger, but they believed their exaggerations. After all, they were engaged in a worldwide Cold War struggle with the Soviet bloc for supremacy and Vietnam was one front in that conflict.

The problem with this explanation for U.S. war is that the accumulated evidence shows that the Soviet Union and China were too weak to offer any real resistance to aggressive U.S. moves there or elsewhere in Asia or Africa. The old Cold War image of world communism on the march in Vietnam and Southeast Asia could not be farther from the truth.

It is now clear that both Moscow and Washington knew that the Soviet Union lacked even a minimum nuclear deterrent before the latter half of the 1960s. After the Geneva settlement, the Soviets and Chinese were so worried about the possibility of war with the United States that they pressured the Vietnamese communists not to do anything to challenge the consolidation of power by the U.S.-sponsored anti-communist regime in South Vietnam. The Eisenhower administration could cast aside the provisions of the 1954 Geneva agreement on free elections to reunify Vietnam, in the confidence that the communist world would not respond militarily.

Taking advantage of this communist passivity, the United States soon became the dominant power in mainland Southeast Asia, with client regimes in South Vietnam, Thailand and, briefly, even in Laos. As late as 1960, the Chinese were warning the North

Vietnamese that they couldn't reunify the country because U.S. imperialism wouldn't allow it.

The myth of the domino theory's hold on U.S. policymakers collapses under the weight of the historical evidence. True, before the huge U.S. Korean War military buildup, and before China's military weakness was clear, the Truman administration feared that the power balance in Southeast Asia was tilting toward the communists.

But after that buildup, the Eisenhower administration understood that the power balance had shifted very strongly in favor of the United States. When President Dwight Eisenhower first articulated the domino effect publicly in 1954, he no longer believed it. He was merely using that argument to strengthen Soviet and Chinese fears of a possible U.S. intervention.

In 1961, when John F. Kennedy's advisers tried to persuade him to send U.S. troops to Laos and Vietnam, they argued that the Chinese would not be ready to use force beyond their borders for years to come. The CIA estimated that the Soviets would still restrain Hanoi from deeper involvement in the South rather than risk any broadening of hostilities.

In the rationale for their recommendation to President Lyndon B. Johnson to bomb North Vietnam in late 1964, the nation's top national security officials emphasized that the Chinese and North Vietnamese could not be sure that the United States would not use nuclear weapons, and would therefore be deterred from any major military response. They still hoped that Hanoi might once again order the Viet Cong in the South to retreat, at least temporarily, from the battlefield in the face of the U.S. threat.

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In the light of the prominent role of U.S. military dominance in the decisions for ever-deeper U.S. military intervention in the country, the historical parallel between the occupations of Vietnam and Iraq becomes far more compelling. In both cases, global U.S. dominance fed ambitions to extend U.S. power and influence over an entire region. And in both cases, national security managers assumed that they could use military power without great cost or risk of a bigger war and counted heavily on its intimidating effect on their foes. They were dead wrong on both Vietnam and Iraq.

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The common pattern underlying the military adventures in Vietnam and Iraq suggests that there are inherent dangers in having global military dominance. Without any other state or states to balance the United States, the national security managers are easily tempted to use force to advance the U.S. power position. That temptation is far deeper than a particular set of personalities or ideological bent, and it will require fundamental reforms to overcome it.

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