



# Introduction

No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now.

—RICHARD NIXON, *No More Vietnams*, 1994

THE VIETNAM WAR ended on April 30, 1975. For the first time in American history, the United States lost: not to another superpower, which would have been bad enough, but to a small country in Southeast Asia. “A raggedy-ass little fourth-rate country,” Lyndon Johnson said dismissively.

It was a humiliating experience for a nation proud of its history of freedom, economic opportunity, and military power. A certain mood of boundless self-confidence seemed to settle into a deepening self-doubt, as though the United States, having suffered its first defeat, had reached a tipping point in its distinguished history. Still a superpower, the United States went on to win the cold war; but the one battle of the war that it did lose, in Vietnam, had a disproportionate, powerful impact on American presidents, politics, and policy.

No doubt, a hundred years from now, historians will look back on this period and wonder why—given that the United States won the big war—its loss in the comparative backwater of Vietnam had so huge and lingering an impact on policymakers. Americans had enjoyed a feeling of limitless opportunity. No challenge seemed insurmountable, no war unwinnable. Even during the Tet offensive in January 1968, arguably the turning point in the Vietnam War, Secretary of State Dean Rusk pressed his thumb on a coffee table and proclaimed, with fearless self-confidence, that when the United States wanted to do something, it did it. The loss in Vietnam robbed the United States of its totally unrealistic, romantic sense of omnipotence. It left Americans feeling like other people who have suffered losses and indignities. It took some getting used to.

The raucous divisions of the 1960s between supporters and critics of the war, between hard hats and long-haired protesters, echoed through the years, affecting issues as diverse as immigration and abortion, gun control and the environment, and, of course, war and peace. While neither side had a monopoly on patriotism, both claimed it, poisoning the political atmosphere even further. One especially shameful example focused on a Senate race in Georgia in 2002 between Democratic senator Max Cleland, a Vietnam veteran who had left three limbs in the jungle swamps, and his Republican challenger, C. Saxby Chambliss, who did not serve in the military. It was an ugly race, during which Chambliss, in a TV advertisement, maliciously linked Cleland with Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, in this way questioning the Democrat's loyalty and patriotism. Chambliss won the election.

The story of Vietnam, the war and its aftermath, runs like a bleeding wound through recent American history, affecting every president from Gerald Ford to Barack Obama and raising profound questions about their prerogatives and powers. How can a president avoid another Vietnam? Should a president commit troops to war only when "national interests" are directly involved? How are U.S. interests to be defined these days? Must a president have an "exit strategy" before committing troops? Should he, like George H. W. Bush at the time of the Persian Gulf War, use overwhelming military force, getting out as quickly as he got in? Or should he, like Ronald Reagan, shy away from using any military force, even after the killing of 241 U.S. Marines in Beirut? Does a president still need congressional backing, as Lyndon Johnson believed, or can he act on his own authority, considering, in this age of terrorism, the need for swift action?

These questions have no easy answers. When confronting such post-Vietnam challenges as terrorism and asymmetrical warfare, presidents have often found themselves haunted by the "ghosts" of Vietnam, as though, magically, in the entrails of a lost war, they may yet find a solution to their current problems, or discover a mistake they can avoid, or detect a way around the dysfunction and frustration they see and feel.

Presidents from Harry Truman in the mid-1940s to Nixon in the late 1960s bear a particular responsibility for the disaster in Vietnam. How could one president after another make so many unfortunate decisions? They did have other options. Nothing was written on tablets of stone. Yet, step by step, they committed the prestige and power of the United States to a colonial war in Indochina that soon morphed into a civil war, a colossal blunder that ended up wasting tens of thousands of American lives and millions of Vietnamese

lives. These presidents reached their decisions in profound ignorance of Vietnam's history and culture. They lived in the cauldron of the cold war, and they worried about falling dominoes, seeing the loss of Vietnam as a step toward more catastrophic losses throughout the Pacific. And often in these years one heard a variation of the old politically charged question, once aimed at President Truman: "Who lost China?" Now, a Republican eyeing the White House might consider a campaign strategy rotating around the question, "Who lost Afghanistan?" The candidate's answer would almost certainly be Barack Obama.

Our story, to be clear, is not about the Vietnam War. That story has already been told by Stanley Karnow, Neil Sheehan, William Prochnau, John Prados, and many others. Our story is about the legacy of that war. Whatever the specific issue or provocation—whether it was the capture of the *Mayaguez* in 1975, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the deaths of the 241 Marines in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1983, the Persian Gulf War, or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—Vietnam always seemed to have a seat in the Oval Office, playing a surprisingly critical role in many presidential decisions. The loss of Vietnam has profoundly changed how presidents decide questions of war and peace and how they interact with Congress, the public, and the world. In short, Vietnam has infiltrated the presidential DNA, even though presidents have struggled with this DNA in different ways.

Vietnam has also disrupted a familiar pattern in presidential politics of honoring and favoring those candidates who have served in the military. Since the founding of the Republic in 1776, military service during wartime has been a preamble to political reward. The commanding generals in three of America's major wars went on to become two-term presidents: George Washington after the Revolutionary War, Ulysses S. Grant after the Civil War, and Dwight D. Eisenhower after World War II. Andrew Jackson, the flamboyant hero of the War of 1812, rode his fame into the White House, as did Zachary Taylor, a general in the Mexican War. Theodore Roosevelt, commanding his Rough Riders, captured the public's imagination in the Spanish-American War and went on to win the White House. John Kennedy and Richard Nixon both launched their political careers in 1946 as World War II veterans, winning seats in the House of Representatives en route to their successful presidential campaigns.

Up until 1992, every successful presidential candidate since World War II had served his country in uniform during wartime. Then a baby boomer named Bill Clinton, who had danced through hoops to avoid service in

Vietnam, upset the traditional pattern by defeating a World War II hero, George H. W. Bush. In 1996 Clinton beat another World War II veteran, Robert Dole, badly wounded during the Italian campaign. In 2000 George W. Bush, a Texas governor who had joined the National Guard to sidestep Vietnam, outmaneuvered and beat Democrat Al Gore, an incumbent vice president who had served honorably as an army journalist in Vietnam. In 2004 Bush won again, defeating John Kerry, a Massachusetts senator who had fought in Vietnam and won medals for courage and valor. Kerry's Vietnam service, ironically, was a major factor in his defeat, as chapter 8 recounts. And in 2008 Obama, a young Democratic senator from Illinois, only thirteen years of age when the war ended, beat John McCain, a Republican senator from Arizona who had been shot down over North Vietnam and then spent five years in a Hanoi prison camp.

Clearly, any identification with Vietnam, whether as a military hero or an honorably discharged veteran, proved a political liability rather than an asset; avoiding military service in Vietnam was not a bar to election. The war drained American politics of the need for a commander-in-chief to be a veteran of military service.

Vietnam changed other patterns, too. The soldiers of the Vietnam War were primarily draftees, serving in the military as part of a broad system of compulsory national service. Nixon believed that the widespread antiwar demonstrations on college campuses were fueled by fears of the draft and the dangers of fighting in Vietnam. In 1969, the same year that he decided to start the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, he also decided to phase out the draft. Now the United States goes to war with an all-volunteer force, and there are few antiwar demonstrations on college campuses.

After Vietnam, the Pentagon surveyed the strategic landscape, and cringed. America's strategic arsenal had been depleted, its budget repeatedly cut or frozen in the country's focus on Southeast Asia. The army, navy, air force, and Marine Corps had all been diminished and demoralized. Left with feelings of shame and anger, many veterans found it hard to admit that they had been defeated; that in the jungles of Vietnam, the vaunted American military had somehow lost its fighting edge, its capacity to produce miracles on the battlefield.

It took more than a decade to rehabilitate the American military, and longer still to restore feelings of national pride. Part of this turnaround resulted from the development of a new kind of officer corps, highly educated, academic, determined to avoid leading troops into another Vietnam-style

conflict. They spent time at universities and in think tanks, and they came up with new theories and doctrines of warfare. General David Petraeus, for example, obtained a Ph.D. from Princeton; his dissertation was on the lessons and mistakes of Vietnam.

The shadow of the American failure in Vietnam fell on every president from Gerald Ford to Obama, as each one, in his own way, grappled with foreign challenges of unprecedented complexity:

—Gerald Ford decided to use overwhelming force to liberate a merchant ship, the *Mayaguez*, seized by Cambodian pirates. Operating in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War, he worried that allies and adversaries would consider the United States a paper tiger.

—Jimmy Carter, appalled by the bloodletting of Vietnam, yearned for a bloodless presidency dedicated to peaceful endeavors. For a time, he succeeded: diplomacy produced a variety of agreements with Panama, China, the Soviet Union, Israel, and Egypt, all impressive accomplishments. But then came the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Prodded by his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter secretly armed an anti-Soviet force of fanatical mujahidin fighters to take on, slow down, and ultimately defeat the Soviet troops.

—Ronald Reagan was shocked by the terrorist murder of 241 U.S. Marines in Beirut. He knew who did it and where they were. Though he boasted of American power and position, he did not retaliate, even though American warships were then off the coast of Lebanon. After Vietnam, he did not want to put them through another difficult military adventure whose outcome was uncertain. Reagan also encouraged the creation of a new military doctrine, later called the Powell Doctrine, to determine when and under what circumstances the United States would or should enter a foreign conflict.

—George H. W. Bush, an adherent of the Powell Doctrine, sent a half-million-man army to the Middle East to evict Iraqi troops from Kuwait. He led a swift and successful operation and then withdrew the American troops. He refused to go as far as Baghdad and capture Saddam Hussein, because he was concerned that the United States could get too deeply involved in another foreign war.

—Bill Clinton, when faced with crises in Somalia, Haiti, and Kosovo, used diplomacy and the threat of force to gain an acceptable solution. He did not want to send ground troops anywhere. He feared another Vietnam, the war he hated and escaped with student deferments. His antiwar aides shared his strong aversion to the use of American military force unless absolutely necessary.

—George W. Bush, after 9/11, became a war president, believing that the world had to be put on notice that no one could assault the United States with impunity. He uprooted the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and then invaded Iraq, where he got bogged down for a long time and where officials feared another Vietnam.

—Barack Obama, proclaiming that Afghanistan was not Vietnam, raised the number of American troops in Afghanistan to 100,000 in an effort to head off a Taliban takeover of the country. But he has been tormented by an enveloping fear that slowly but inexorably he was being drawn into another Vietnam. He made much of a July 2011 exit strategy, but then kicked the can down the road to December 2014, postponing the date for a substantial withdrawal of American troops. He seemed stuck in a war with no acceptable outcome.

In many of their decisions about war and peace, about foreign and political strategy, these seven presidents have been living with the gloomy legacy of a war lost decades ago. Words such as “Vietnam,” “quagmire,” or “syndrome” have become instant shorthand for the popular image of the United States getting trapped in another long, costly, and unwinnable war. No president can any longer reach critical decisions about committing troops to battle in faraway lands without weighing the consequences of the American defeat in Vietnam. That war still casts an unforgiving shadow over Oval Office deliberations. Unwanted, uninvited, but inescapable, Vietnam refuses to be forgotten.