



## LESSONS LEARNED FROM VIETNAM

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PHOTO: A combined team of Regional and Popular Forces, National Police Field Forces, and the recon platoon of 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry stand quietly watching Americal Division helicopters approach to take them on a dawn combat assault. (Americal Division Veterans Association Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University)

**O**F LATE, there has been a good deal of speculation that in coping with Afghanistan, there are lessons to learn from our Vietnam experience. An interesting example of this evincing considerable research is the article, "Afghanistan and the Vietnam Template" in the 2009 November/December *Military Review*, by two scholars, Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason. The authors seem to have derived their views on Vietnam largely from reading material published long after the war. My views are somewhat in variance with theirs and are based on my having been directly involved in the Vietnam War and its aftermath continuously from late 1965 to early 1976, from the rice paddies to the White House, including 20 months "in-country." (Later, while on the faculty of Georgetown University, I also did considerable research on Vietnam.)

### Popular Misconceptions about Vietnam

As do most commenting on the Vietnam War, the authors of "Afghanistan and the Vietnam Template" suggest that the war, as we and the South Vietnamese fought it, was, *a priori*, unwinnable and that numerous parallels exist between it and the current war in Afghanistan. However, Johnson and Mason do note important structural differences. Where I think they soon go astray is in their assessment of the enemy in Vietnam. For example, they describe the Viet Cong as "poorly equipped guerrillas," but this was true only in their early operations. Before long, the Viet Cong were in some ways much better equipped than the South Vietnamese they were fighting. For example, for far too long, slightly built South Vietnamese troops had to carry heavy U.S. semi-automatic M-1 Garand rifles left over from World War II and Korea while Viet Cong forces soon armed themselves with reliable, highly effective, fully automatic Soviet AK-47 Kalashnikov assault rifles. In this regard, the Viet Cong were even better armed for a while than U.S. troops were.

More dubious is the authors' assertion that "the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Viet Cong (VC) were not fighting for communism. They were fighting for Vietnam," a sense we simply did not get at the time. This assertion is no doubt related to the widespread and persistent myth that

Ho Chi Minh was really more of a “nationalist” than a Communist. In 1930, the Soviet-controlled Communist International (Comintern) sent trusted agent Ho Chi Minh to Hong Kong to found the Vietnamese Communist Party. In mid-1946, Ho’s Communist forces joined the French in crushing genuine nationalist groups that were both anti-French and anti-Communist; hundreds of their leaders were executed at Ho’s behest. Ho abhorred nationalism and always considered himself an internationalist Communist. In 1951, Ho declared in *Selected Works* that “Genuine patriotism is . . . part and parcel of internationalism.” Through large-scale executions, proscriptions, and brutal control, Ho established in North Vietnam a tightly controlled Communist entity devoted to extending Communism throughout Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. As did the Viet Cong, all units of Ho’s “Vietnamese People’s Army” had political officers to ensure the ideological purity of troops already indoctrinated in Communism throughout their school years. You may be sure that the soldiers in this North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong were well aware that they were fighting to extend Communism to South Vietnam. Of course this was also coupled with the patriotic appeal to unify all Vietnam. But as North Vietnam leader Pham Van Dong declared in 1960, “The Communist is the most genuine patriot.” We were absolutely justified in regarding the war as one against Communism. This was most certainly proven when Hanoi’s victory in 1975 resulted in the imposition of Communism on what had been a remarkably free South Vietnam.

This *Military Review* article is also off the mark in comparing external assistance to our foes in Vietnam and Afghanistan. There is a vast difference between the very limited (if any) support the Taliban allegedly has been receiving from Pakistan and from “wealthy Saudis” and the massive amount of military supplies North Vietnam received from

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the Soviet Union and China, including, tanks, long range artillery, rockets, and sophisticated surface-to-air missiles.

The authors of “Afghanistan and the Vietnam Template” make much of the role corruption played in thwarting our objectives in Vietnam by contributing to the South Vietnam government’s lack of legitimacy. It so happens that corruption was (and is) endemic throughout the developing world and even, at times, in much of the developed world. To have expected South Vietnam to be an exception was unrealistic. In fact, corruption was considerably more widespread in North Vietnam than in the South, giving lie to a common assumption that there was something morally pristine about the highly disciplined North. In fact, the problem of corruption had become so acute in the North that, in 1967, Ho Chi Minh himself felt compelled to go on the radio and inveigh against this troublesome plague.

I alluded to the high desertion rate of South Vietnamese (ARVN) troops. This was indeed a serious problem. However, most of those who deserted did so out of homesickness or because of low morale due to poor leadership. It is noteworthy that territorial forces, the “Ruff-Puff” Regional Forces and Popular Forces, which did as much fighting and dying as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) did, had a relatively low desertion rate because these troops were defending their homes, their villages, and their hamlets. In any case very few ARVN deserters ever went over to the enemy side. However, by 1967, some 75,000 NVA and VC troops had *defected* to our side. Our military put some of these to good use, especially by the Marines, whose Kit Carson Scouts performed extremely well and proved to be exceptionally loyal. I have long felt that we made a fundamental mistake by not forming small units of enemy defectors with sapper and guerrilla experience and inserting them into enemy territory to attack enemy bases and lines of communications that, alas, remained largely neglected by our forces.

I got this idea from a senior VC defector who had been a regimental commander and was bitter because he was passed over for promotion because he got a local girl pregnant. He said that everyone he knew on his side wondered why we never staged ambushes along their LOCs or attacked their bases

with ground troops. In other words, we were giving them a free ride in much of the country. Unfortunately, I could never sell my idea to either U.S. or Vietnamese generals. I still believe that this program could have, early on, changed the course of the war by tying down large numbers of enemy troops in defensive roles and at very low cost. At this time, we were spending \$1 billion a month (in 1966 dollars) on the war. I have heard it said that when one has too many resources, one is less resourceful, and that was certainly the case in Vietnam.

### Important Lessons of Our Vietnam Experience

I can best illustrate my views of the lessons to learn from Vietnam by providing a broad review of the war. Our most fundamental mistake of the war was encouraging the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963. Diem had done a masterful job of neutralizing or destroying the various political factions that were dividing and debilitating South Vietnam. I once read a captured 1959 report from the leading Communist cadre in the South, which described a badly decimated Communist organization struggling to exist as the result of depredations imposed by Diem. The Party was determined to reverse this situation by going on the offensive. This manifested itself in intensified terrorist attacks in the South in early 1960 followed by the infiltration of several hundred NVA troops each month into South Vietnam. Then there was formation of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) in late 1960, which was in line with the practice of forming Communist-dominated fronts in accordance with a 1935 Comintern decision to form popular fronts as innocuous disguises of Communist control. The Viet Minh and later the Lien Viet front were North Vietnamese examples of this.

The NLF was touted by Radio Hanoi on 3 February 1961 as a grouping of “various political parties, peoples groups and religious and patriotic personalities.” Hanoi steadfastly denied having any ties to the NLF or that it was in any way Communist controlled. This ruse deceived many in the West, but fewer in Vietnam. I even had Embassy colleagues who believed that the NLF actually existed

as an independent force and could be enticed to split from Hanoi. We captured millions of pages of documents from the enemy side and those relating to the NLF were all purely propaganda recommendations and never indicated that the NLF had any real authority or operational responsibilities. Simply a facade, for all practical purposes, the NLF really did not exist, although it continued to be the label most in the West applied to the enemy in the South. With Hanoi’s victory in 1975, the NLF pretence was dropped and it disappeared. (Also Hanoi’s Vietnam Workers Party reverted to Vietnam Communist Party.)

**Diem’s downfall.** Diem’s strategic hamlet program brought “good control in the countryside” according to Ambassador James. D. Rosenthal, a very observant junior Foreign Service officer stationed in the most exposed Northern provinces of South Vietnam in 1962 and 1963. The strategic hamlet program had critics, however, and Diem himself was not very popular. American officials described him as an autocratic “mandarin,” aloof and difficult to deal with. His final undoing was his somewhat inept handling of Buddhist demonstrations in May 1963. The demonstrations were



Demonstration supporting the generals who ousted President Ngo Dinh Diem. The four youths perched on the roof of the vehicle in the foreground also hold a hand-written sign calling for the execution of President Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu, January 1963.



politically, not religiously, motivated. Although he was resented by many of the Buddhist majority for being Catholic, Diem by no means oppressed or persecuted Buddhists. Indeed, he had had a number of Buddhist pagodas erected. His suppression of these essentially political demonstrations led to the widely publicized self-immolations of Buddhist monks that shocked Western public opinion. Here, the U.S. media succeeded in putting Diem in the worst possible light. This was the beginning of the great and baleful influence our media was to have on U.S. political and public opinion toward Vietnam for the next 12 years and which, as we shall see, contributed mightily to the ultimate Communist victory in 1975.

This influence led to the ill-fated U.S. support of Diem's overthrow on 1 November 1963, which resulted in the murder of both Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. The murders totally surprised and shocked those Americans who had been supporting the coup plotters. Diem's overthrow led to prolonged political instability in Saigon and elsewhere and resulted in the disintegration of his pacification programs in the countryside. In 1964, seven succeeding governments rose and fell in Saigon, all of which were far worse and less capable than Diem's government and generally unpopular. All this greatly encouraged the Communist side who soon took advantage of the chaotic situation.

Because we openly encouraged Diem's ouster, Vietnam now became *our responsibility*. We had essentially "bought the war." This is why we old Vietnam hands always become alarmed at suggestions we oust or neutralize Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai. The disastrous overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem is certainly one salient lesson we should have learned from our Vietnam experience.

Encouraged by the instability Diem's ouster created, the Communist side went on the offensive, and in 1964, it began a serious infiltration of NVA

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troops. The military situation deteriorated, and U.S. installations were attacked. This led to retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam, and in March 1965 the introduction of the first U.S. combat units: Marine battalions. When I arrived in Saigon in late 1965, the city was in a virtual stage of siege. One couldn't go one click (1 km) outside of the city limits without risking being shot at. The city itself seemed awash with VC terrorists. In the some twenty months I was quartered in a residential part of the city, about three dozen civilians were killed within three blocks of where I lived, many as the result of rocket attacks. Nevertheless, I was struck by the degree of freedom everyone seemed to enjoy when it seemed to me that the constant threat of Communist attack warranted the establishment of martial law. Also, I was impressed that VC terrorist suspects enjoyed reasonably fair trials and some were even acquitted for lack of evidence. Successive governments left much to be desired and too readily turned a blind eye to corruption and incompetence, but they were not in the least oppressive.

On the other hand, the VC clearly relied on terror to gain popular allegiance. This was graphically brought home to me shortly after I arrived when we got word that VC cadres in a hamlet close to Saigon had just assassinated two young women, one a nurse and the other a teacher, simply because they represented a government presence. From 1964 to 1967, over 6,000 hamlet chiefs, schoolteachers, nurses, and social workers were assassinated for the same reason—to coerce villagers into allegiance to the VC. While it may not always have had "legitimacy" by American standards, the government of South Vietnam managed to function somehow and at least the populace never feared it. It seemed significant to me that whenever people fled from the countryside to escape a natural disaster or war, they always fled to areas controlled by the government of South Vietnam, never to VC-controlled ones.

**The Tet offensive.** By the time I left Vietnam in late August 1967, things had considerably improved, despite all the mistakes and shortcomings which plagued our war effort and that of the South Vietnamese. Indeed, our side was finally beginning to win the war. This fact was reflected in statements by President Johnson and our top officials in Vietnam indicating that there was "light at the end of the tunnel." This is why the notorious

“Tet Offensive” had such a shattering and lasting impact on the American public and its leaders and ultimately helped ensure a Communist victory.

For Vietnamese, Tet, or the Chinese New Year as some termed it, was Christmas, New Year’s Eve, and a birthday celebration rolled into one event. People bought new clothes, exchanged gifts and prepared choice dishes to celebrate this very special occasion. There was usually a truce in the fighting on this day, and troops were on leave. When the Communist side, mostly VC troops and cadre, launched a surprise massive attack on the night of 30-31 January 1968, it came as a major shock to all. Most shocking was the ability of Communist forces to attack 34 provincial towns, 64 district towns, and all autonomous cities, including Saigon, where they actually entered the grounds of our embassy, an especially shocking event. (U.S. media wrongly reported that VC had actually entered the embassy.) U.S. media, especially TV, graphically brought scenes of destruction and disaster home to Americans, and they made a lasting impression. This was a shattering antithesis of “light at the end of the tunnel.”

The avowed purpose of this concerted attack was to foment and support a general popular uprising. This planned “Great Uprising” never got off the ground. Instead, the vast majority of the South Vietnamese people staunchly supported the South Vietnamese government; people and their armed forces at all levels resisted and fought back with courage and determination, often at risk to their lives. This was certainly a dramatic recognition of the South Vietnamese government’s legitimacy, if ever there was one, and negates one of two reasons Johnson and Mason say Vietnam was lost: “The inability to establish legitimacy of governance which the rural population would prefer to an alternative to the National Liberation Front (NLF) enough to risk their lives for.” This massive offensive was thoroughly crushed countrywide, and the VC suffered a catastrophic defeat from which it never fully recovered.

**Media bias.** However, the media scarcely reported this critically important fact. The media remained wedded to the proposition that the Tet Offensive was an unmitigated disaster that proved the war could not be won. Walter Cronkite, who made a quick trip to Vietnam in late February 1968

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after the Tet Offensive had been roundly defeated and VC all but neutralized, disregarded on-the-spot briefings he received to this effect. He returned to the United States, and in a 27 February broadcast, described the Tet offensive as an American defeat and recommended we negotiate our way out of the war. President Johnson, after viewing this broadcast reportedly declared, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost middle America.” Thus, even though the enemy was thoroughly defeated in Vietnam, thanks to U.S. media, the enemy won the war where it most counted—in the United States.

This brings me to the critical role the media played in Vietnam. While I was “in-country” I generally found that what our correspondents were reporting back to the United States bore little resemblance to what I was actually experiencing on the ground. I have had several correspondents tell me that their editors wanted only negative reporting and when they tried to report any positive event or development their material inevitably landed in a waste paper basket or on the floor of a TV cutting room. So they gave up trying. The best description of the perverse role played by U.S. media can be found in what I consider to be the best of all books on the Vietnam War, *Vietnam at War, The History 1946-1975*, by Lieutenant General Phillip B. Davidson, U.S. Army (Retired) (Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1988) from which I will now freely quote (pages 487-489):

“One correspondent with several years experience in Vietnam, Robert Elegant [whom I personally knew and greatly respected], who scathingly reproached his colleagues not only for their misleading reports, not only on the Tet offensive, but on the entire war, wrote, ‘. . . never before Vietnam had the collective policy of the media—no less stringent term will serve—sought by graphic and unremitting distortion—the victory of the enemies of

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the correspondents own side . . . ' [T]here was the herd instinct. Most correspondents reported the war negatively because the other newsmen covered it that way '[W]hy was the press . . . so superficial and so biased?' he writes, 'Chief among many, I believe, the politicization of correspondents by the constantly intensifying clamor over Vietnam in Europe and America. The press was instinctively "against the government" — at least reflectively, for Saigon's enemies.' The television coverage of the Tet offensive revealed the awesome power of that medium to influence national events. On 18 July 1982 Tom Wicker, the columnist appeared on . . . [a] television program with . . . panelists [David] Brinkley, Sam Donaldson and George Will. This group, widely variant in ideological outlook, unanimously agreed that it has become

impossible for a nation to fight a war if the blood and carnage of the battlefield appears nightly on the country's television screens. George Will cited the Battle of Antietam in the American Civil War as an example, saying, 'if the North could have seen that battle in living color, it would have elected McClellan president, and we would be two nations today.'"

**The Hue Massacre and My Lai.** One of most egregious examples of media delinquency in Vietnam reporting was blatantly ignoring the horrendous Hue Massacre carried out during the Tet Offensive. NVA and VC forces seized the old imperial capital Hue in northern South Vietnam on January 30, 1968, and held it for 26 days. In that time, cadres with clipboards of previously prepared lists of Hue's "class enemies"—civil servants, community leaders, and policemen and their families—went about arresting those on the

list, nearly 6,000 of whom simply disappeared and were no doubt executed. After Hue was liberated, a mass grave containing some 3,000 bodies, including two Catholic priests, was found. There is reason to believe that most were buried alive since there were no wounds on these bodies. The *New York Times*, which had the largest news bureau in Saigon, did not even cover this gruesome discovery but simply carried a wire service report. In all, this, at best, rated only one-day's coverage. An acquaintance of mine told me of a visit to the mass grave. A TV crew was present, but it didn't bother taking any footage because the correspondent in charge "didn't want to produce any anti-Communist propaganda." (I'm not making this up.) On 16 March 1968, a unit of the Americal Division sweeping through the hamlet of My Lai rounded up nearly 200 unarmed women, old



Bits of tattered clothing, sandals and slippers are examined by South Vietnamese women who lost relatives in the 1968 Tet massacre. The mass grave discovered in Hue yielded remains of 250 victims.

Douglas Pike Photograph Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University

men, and children and shot them all in what the world came to know as the My Lai massacre. The division wrongly and stupidly covered this up for about a year. When the story of this atrocity finally leaked out, the media went into a prolonged feeding frenzy of accusations. Eventually the officer in charge of the offending unit, a First Lieutenant William Calley, was sentenced by a court martial to life imprisonment at hard labor, although he was paroled in 1974.

After I returned to the State Department, I frequently gave talks on Vietnam to a variety of groups, most of which were hostile to our presence there. On each occasion, I would ask the audience how many had heard of the Hue Massacre. Invariably, not a single hand would go up. When I asked how many had heard of the My Lai Massacre, all hands would go up. The former case represented Hanoi's policy, which it publicly justified, carried out systematically under orders, and it symbolized what the war was all about. The latter case was a tragic aberration perpetrated in blatant defiance of our laws and military policy. This distinction mattered little when it came to media coverage of the two events. This is another Vietnam lesson to learn: our own media are capable of becoming a force multiplier for our enemies.

**Pacification and legitimacy.** With the effective elimination of the Viet Cong, pacification proceeded apace. By the end of 1968, 76 percent of villages in South Vietnam were declared "relatively secure," which augured well for the success of pacification. In 1969, a bicycle race took place from the north end of the country clear down to the south end. This would have been unimaginable prior to Tet. By the end of 1969, thanks to active American and Vietnamese pacification programs, 92 percent of the population and 90 percent of the villages and hamlets were pronounced secure or relatively secure. President Thieu had, in April 1968, organized the Peoples Self-Defense Force ultimately joined by four million, equipped with some 600,000 weapons. This was clear proof of Thieu's confidence in the loyalties of the people and clear evidence of the government's legitimacy. The pacification program reached its culmination in one of the most successful land reforms in history, the "Land to the Tiller" program, which Thieu initiated in 1970 and resulted in nearly all who farmed owning their

own land. (This very positive development was, of course, ignored by U.S. media.) Throughout the countryside, this substantially strengthened political allegiance to the government, further enhancing its legitimacy. Decisive attrition of VC strength resulting from South Vietnamese and U.S. military actions was the primary factor in protecting the people and isolating them from the VC, thus making pacification possible.

In retrospect, I believe that one of the major mistakes we made in Vietnam was our failure to capitalize on this pacification by beginning the Vietnamization process earlier. As soon as the situation had stabilized in 1966, we should have devoted considerable resources to training officers and noncoms and to upgrading the weapons and other equipment of South Vietnamese forces, both ARVN and the "Ruff-Puff." At the time, the condescending attitude of most who served in Vietnam was "stand aside, you little guys, and let us experts do the job." I must confess that I was among those who felt that way.

Of course, the Vietnamese who had already been fighting for some years were only too happy to comply. The short one-year tours of duty also militated against our devoting time to Vietnamization. There was too much else that had to be accomplished in that short time. It was not until 1968 that we began a serious effort to re-equip and improve the effectiveness of the ARVN and plan for Vietnamization. In 1969, President Nixon implemented the program and began withdrawing U.S. troops that summer. ARVN forces increased their combat operations significantly and were doing well.

This was exemplified by its performance in the April-May 1970 combined operations against Communist sanctuaries in previously off-limits Cambodia. However, a later ill-advised incursion into Laos without American support, Operation Lam Son 719, ended in a well-publicized disorderly withdrawal and inordinate casualties. Though the NVA suffered even more substantial losses, that was never reported.

By 1972, all U.S. ground forces, except for advisors, had been withdrawn from South Vietnam. In that year, U.S. forces suffered 200 killed in action as opposed to the previous annual average of 7,000. However, we still provided significant air, naval and



logistics support. With Viet Cong forces defeated, Hanoi decided, in 1972, to test Vietnamization by launching its largest conventional offensive of the war. This “Easter Offensive” employed the equivalent of 23 divisions equipped with hundreds of Soviet supplied tanks, long-range artillery and rockets, surface-to-air missiles, and other modern weapons. South Vietnamese ground forces—ARVN (Army) and Marines—with absolutely crucial U.S. air, naval and logistics support, stopped the offensive and launched counter offensives, *inter alia*, recapturing the enemy’s strongest position, Quang Tri, which was very near North Vietnam itself.

If they couldn’t hold Quang Tri, they probably couldn’t have held anything else. This offensive cost North Vietnam about 100,000 killed in action, twice the number of KIAs U.S. troops suffered in the entire war. It had to scrape the bottom of its manpower barrel to launch this offensive. After Hanoi’s 1975 victory, a former top commander in the South, General Tran Van Tra, revealed in the Party organ *Nhan Dan* that, in effect, his troops were on the ropes and close to defeat by 1972. As former CIA Director William Colby wrote in his 1983 book *Lost Victory*, “On the ground in South Vietnam the war had been won [by the fall of 1972].”

Unfortunately, we in the White House did not fully appreciate this fact. CIA analysts had, since the Tet Offensive, been convinced that the war was unwinnable, and that conviction no doubt accounted for their neither flagging nor appreciating this effective defeat of the enemy. After serving two years in the “intelligence community” in State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, I became thoroughly disillusioned by the politicization of intelligence analysis. In both CIA and State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, analysts had a distinct bias, which harmfully skewed their judgment. At this time, I was Henry Kissinger’s expert on the enemy, but I came to believe we were ill-served by the CIA. A true picture of what had actually happened did not exist.

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My own judgment was impaired by having early on been caught directly in the path of the Easter Offensive on a fact-finding mission. Being continuously on the receiving end of heavy Soviet ordnance for days did not make me optimistic about the outcome. Also, the American advisors I initially talked to were, wrongly as it turned out, just as pessimistic.

Kissinger’s eagerness to end the war through negotiation resulted in our snatching defeat from the jaws of victory by prematurely concluding the Paris “Peace Accords,” which unfortunately left North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam and an ill-advised “ceasefire in place.” As North Vietnamese General Van Tien Dung cogently wrote in *Nhan Dan* in 1976, “The [Paris] agreement represented a big victory for our people and a big defeat for the U.S. imperialists and their lackeys.”

After this, Congress reduced U.S. military aid to South Vietnam by nearly 70 percent. On 4 June 1973, its Case-Church Amendment banned all U.S. military operations in Indochina. This decisively ensured South Vietnam’s defeat in 1975. As Van Tien Dung said, “The decrease in American aid made it impossible for Saigon troops to carry out their combat and force development plans.” As Dung put it in his book *Great Spring Victory*, (cited in Davidson’s book mentioned above) “Nguyen Van Thieu was forced to fight a poor man’s war. Enemy firepower had decreased by nearly 60 percent... its mobility was also reduced by half.” We had shamelessly betrayed our ally.

I conclude here with the primary lesson to be learned from Vietnam: public support for any military enterprise abroad is essential. Our government unfortunately did a very poor job of explaining the Vietnam War to its people and of countering negative media reporting about it. We are simply going to have to do better than this in defending our involvement in Afghanistan. **MR**

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