

9/11/01: The End of the Vietnam Syndrome?

Once upon a time there was something called the Vietnam Syndrome, a set of ideas and emotions that grew out of the enormously traumatic experience of the Vietnam War. That “syndrome” has exerted a powerful sway over the United States for more than twenty-five years, contributing to an instinctive and pervasive distrust of government and, more important, to profound fears about sending American military forces abroad.

What I would like to do in this essay is to discuss briefly what the Vietnam Syndrome is and how it came into being, look at the strangle hold it has exerted over U.S. attitudes on key foreign policy issues over the past quarter century, and then speculate, necessarily tentatively and inconclusively, on the impact that the dramatic events of September 11, 2001 have had on this syndrome. The major question to be addressed here: did the destruction of the World Trade Center, the attack on the Pentagon, and the ensuing war against terrorism produce a paradigm shift in American attitudes concerning the use of military force abroad?

First the syndrome itself. Where did it come from? As the name suggests, the Vietnam Syndrome is a direct result of what was without question the most difficult, the most divisive, and the most agonizing war the United States has fought in its two hundred year history. It was a peculiarly frustrating war, fought in a climate and on a terrain that were singularly inhospitable: thick jungles, rugged mountains, foreboding swamps and paddies. At least in its initial stages, it was a peoples’ war, where people rather than territory were the primary objective. But Americans as individuals or as a nation could never really bridge the huge cultural gap that separated them from all Vietnamese, making

it difficult at times even to distinguish friend from foe. It was a war without distinct battle lines or fixed objectives, where traditional concepts of victory and defeat were blurred, “a formless war against a formless enemy who evaporated into the morning jungle mists only to materialize in some unexpected place,” Marine lieutenant Philip Caputo has written.

It was a limited war, limited in both ends and means, and that brought special frustrations for those who fought it. The United States (for very good reasons) did not use all the resources at its disposal and fought under restrictive rules of engagement. This was especially frustrating for those in the field who could not shoot unless fired upon first and who often felt as though they were fighting with one hand tied behind their back.

In addition, and perhaps most important, it was a war where the balance of forces in Vietnam were stacked against the United States and where success, as it was defined, may have been beyond reach. In seeking to maintain an independent, non-communist country in South Vietnam, the United States attempted a truly formidable undertaking on the basis of a very weak foundation. Indeed, for a variety of historical reasons, had its leaders looked all over the world they could hardly have picked a less promising place to conduct an experiment in nation building. On the other side, from beginning to end, Americans drastically underestimated the strength, determination, and resiliency of their enemies, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, and North Vietnam. They were tightly mobilized and regimented and fanatically committed to their goals. They skillfully applied a strategy of protracted war, recognizing that the Americans, like the French before them, would become impatient and if they bled long and heavily enough would weary of the war. The circumstances of the war thus posed a dilemma that Americans

never really understood, much less resolved. Success would probably have required the physical annihilation of North Vietnam or building a viable government in South Vietnam. For a variety of reasons (most of them good), they refused to try the former. And they were probably incapable of doing the latter. They may have placed themselves in a classic, no-win situation.

With the exception of our own Civil War, where Americans were shooting at each other, Vietnam was also our most divisive war. All American wars, even to a degree World War II, have provoked dissent, but Vietnam aroused more widespread and passionate opposition than other wars, dividing the nation as nothing since the debate over slavery a century earlier. It divided neighbors, colleagues, and churches. Campus protest became a way of life even at conservative institutions like my own University of Kentucky. It divided class against class, father against son, including even the families of top policymakers like Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. There is no more poignant example than that recounted in a powerful recent book titled *American Requiem*, the story of a close-knit Irish-Catholic family torn apart by the war: the father, an air force general; one son, the author, an anti-war priest; another an exile to Canada; a third, an FBI agent tracking dissidents such as his brothers. The author-son and his father split over the war and were not reconciled even on the father's deathbed. "I had broken his heart," the son concluded, "and the final truth was that he had broken mine."

The war spurred various kinds of group and individual protest. As it dragged on seemingly without end and the divisions deepened, the internal turmoil itself contributed to a war-weariness that came to pervade the nation and fed a desire, even among those

who approved the purposes of the war, to end it regardless of the consequences.

The outcome of the war was itself traumatic, of course, far and away the most traumatic of all the wars the United States has participated in, leaving a bad taste in the nation's collective mouth and contributing to the longevity of its impact. It is not entirely accurate to say that Vietnam was the first war America lost. We did not, in a strictly military sense, lose the war. We were never really defeated in battle. Our armed forces withdrew from Vietnam; they were not forced out militarily. But that in itself is of great significance, making the outcome all the more frustrating and difficult to accept.

And for those who fought there, those who supported the war, even for some who opposed it, the ignominious departure of the last helicopter from the embassy rooftop in Saigon on April 30, 1975, a glaring symbol of failure, came very hard. "I grieved," a Kentucky army officer recalled, "I grieved as though I had lost a member of my own family." And for those who had lost children in the war it was especially painful. "Now its all gone down the drain and it hurts. What did he die for?," a Pennsylvanian asked. "The high hopes and wishful idealism with which the American nation had been born had not been destroyed," *Newsweek* observed, "but they had been chastened by the failure of America to work its will there."

Indeed, viewed from the longer perspective, the Vietnam War, as perhaps no other event in U.S. history, caused Americans as a nation to confront a set of beliefs about themselves that form a basic part of their character: the notion that in their dealing with other peoples they have generally acted nobly and benevolently; the certainty that they can achieve anything they set their minds to.

The war ended with most of the major issues unresolved, thus also contributing to

its influence. Was it a good war or a bad war? A noble cause, or essentially immoral? Was it necessary in terms of the national security, or basically needless and senseless? Was it a good war waged poorly? Was it a war that could and indeed should have been won, a war lost only by the timidity and/or stupidity of America's leaders? Or was it a war that could not have been won at a price the nation was willing to pay. We were bitterly divided on these issues while the war was going on, and have continued to be so since. These divisions have contributed to the profound impact the war has exerted on the national psyche for the quarter century after its end.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that the Vietnam experience left Americans deeply troubled and gave rise to a set of attitudes and emotions that would exert a powerful influence for the next twenty-five years.

This brings us back to the Vietnam Syndrome, of course, and the next step is to sum up briefly what it is and how its influence has been manifested in national policy. The syndrome is a complex mix of attitudes and emotions, not easy to define or explain precisely, but it can be broken down into two basic concepts. The first is a profound and pervasive distrust of government. This phenomenon of post-Vietnam American life had many sources: a disillusionment with the welfare state and the regulations that went with it; a waning of faith in government's capacity to solve complex national problems; the Watergate scandals of the Nixon era. But Vietnam certainly played a major part. A credibility gap began to develop in the Johnson years, a natural result of LBJ's propensity to play fast and loose with the truth. The gap grew in the Nixon years until it became a yawning chasm. Both Johnson and Nixon's repeated lies and dissimulations about what they were doing in Vietnam and the results they expected—the light at the end of the

tunnel was the most frequently used cliché—fed it. Such was the pervasiveness of the distrust that the very people who came to Washington to run the government in the post Vietnam era—Ronald Reagan being the prime example—campaigns against and indeed even governed on the basis of distrust of government.

But the central and essential element of the Vietnam Syndrome involved the use of military force abroad. More than anything else, the Vietnam experience, for reasons that have been noted, left Americans of all political persuasions with a powerful determination not to repeat that experience. So for more than twenty-five years after the fall of Saigon in 1975, whenever the issue of using American forces abroad has come up, the ghosts of Vietnam have come with it and the national debate has been conducted largely in the context of memories of that war.

Things like this are never simple, of course, and within the broad rubric of the Vietnam Syndrome there are complex and sometimes contradictory notions and sharp differences of opinion based largely on ideology. There were those in the post-Vietnam era, for example, who believed that the United States as a superpower and a nation with vital international interests must use its military power to defend those interests and shape world events. Generally, these people were conservatives, although in the 1990s they were joined by some liberals who believed that the United States must use its power to prevent genocide, in the Balkans, for example, and to resolve other pressing international problems. These people came to deplore what they saw as the overly restrictive role played by memories of Vietnam, and it was they who came to talk of a “syndrome,” which, by dictionary definition, means: “a group of signs and symptoms that collectively indicate or characterize a disease, psychological disorder, or other *abnormal*

condition.”

On the political left and among a large part of the general public, for different reasons, Vietnam left a deep and abiding fear of the use of force in situations even remotely resembling Vietnam. Some of these people believed that the war was unnecessary or even immoral. They believed that success had been beyond America’s reach, and they feared a repetition of the domestic divisions that had been such a prominent part of the Vietnam experience. Their slogan was “No More Vietnams.” Whenever the issue of using force abroad came up, especially if it concerned possible intervention in Third World countries, they harked back to Vietnam to find reasons to stay out.

The U.S. military in the aftermath of Vietnam was in a category by itself. The military was scarred by the war as no other American institution and left with an overwhelming reluctance to be dragged into anything comparable. Many believed that the war had been lost by the timidity and foolishness of American civilian leaders—Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara were singled out for special villainy— and a refusal on the part of civilians to let the military win. “Sir do we get to win this time?,” asks Rambo, in that classic early line from that classic 1980s film. The war could have been won, it was argued, if American power had been used wisely and decisively. Thus the fundamental lesson was never again to permit themselves to be drawn into a war with unclear goals, without popular support, and where sharp limits were imposed on the use of military power.

Indeed, in the 1980s, under the leadership of Gen. Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, the military formulated a doctrine it would adhere to

rigorously in defining the terms under which it would go to war—the so-called Powell-Weinberger Doctrine. Troops should be committed only as a last resort and only if it was plainly in the national interest to do so. Objectives must be clearly defined and attainable. Public support must be assured. Overwhelming force must be used to achieve complete and decisive victory. As chairman of the Joint Chiefs in 1990-1991, Powell dragged his feet up to the very onset of the Gulf War. During the Bosnia crisis of the mid-1990s, the military and especially Powell fought vigorously to keep the United States out of war, in the eyes of some critics to the point of upsetting the nation's traditional balance in terms of civilian control of the military.

Thus, to repeat and emphasize, for the twenty-five years after April 30, 1975, every time the issue of using American military power abroad reared its head, the ghosts of Vietnam surfaced with it. Debates on the use of force were conducted largely in the context of memories of or lessons from the Vietnam War.

During the Reagan years, Central America was the burning issue, the cause celebre, and the debate over support for the government of El Salvador against a leftist insurgency and for the Nicaraguan Contras against the leftist Sandinista government was decisively shaped by memories of Vietnam.

The Persian Gulf War, it is often said, was as much about Vietnam as it was about oil, Kuwait, and Iraq. The war was fought on the basis of lessons learned from Vietnam, and in its aftermath President George Bush (the elder) claimed, prematurely as it turned out, that the “ghosts of Vietnam had been laid to rest beneath the sands of the Arabian desert”.

Somalia is in the news again as a possible site for another front in the war against

terrorism and also as a result of the film, *Black Hawk Down*. That film tells the story of October 1993 when eighteen Americans were killed in a bloody raid on a tragic Sunday afternoon in downtown Mogadishu, resurrecting, in the most blatant way, the ghosts Bush claimed to have buried which led to a quick withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Somalia and to the emergence of what diplomat Richard Holbrooke called the Vietnam syndrome.

There is no doubt that memories of Vietnam and the experience in Somalia decisively shaped the Clinton administration's profound reluctance to use military force in Bosnia in the 1990s, a reluctance ultimately overcome only by the brutal actions of Slobodan Milosevic. Even then, the force used was confined largely to air power.

As with Bosnia, Milosevic's "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo ultimately overcame Clinton's reluctance to use force. But again, the administration relied largely on air power and at the outset of the war the president stated emphatically that he would not use ground forces, making clear the persisting and powerful influence of the Vietnam Syndrome.

Thus it was reasonable at the turn of the century, a quarter century after the end of the war, to conclude that the ghosts of Vietnam still haunted the nation and that until some other cataclysmic event came along, they would continue to do so and would continue to decisively influence decisions on the use of military force abroad.

Then came September 11, 2001. Terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, causing incredible destruction and the loss of more than 3000 lives, appeared to bring a sudden end to the Vietnam era in American life. The United States itself had come under stunning, brutal attack, and in one fiery moment much of the

emotional and intellectual baggage created by that war seemed to be swept aside in a surge of fear and anger. Patriotism was suddenly fashionable again. Since 1975, every debate on the use of military force abroad had evoked haunting memories of Vietnam. Yet what was really striking in those horrible days after September 11 was that the very word “Vietnam” was conspicuous in its absence from the national dialogue.

Speaking with a single voice for one of the few times since Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Congress granted President George W. Bush (the younger) sweeping, virtually unlimited authorization to use American military forces in a new war against international terrorism. In its shock and grief, a nation that, since Vietnam, had been chronically suspicious of government suddenly turned to government to avenge the appalling loss of life, repair the damage, heal an ailing economy, and provide security against future attacks. Just as Pearl Harbor had wiped away bitter recollections of America’s unhappy participation in World War I, at the same time eliminating inhibitions against involvement in World War II, so also the terrorist attacks of September 11 appeared to expunge memories of America’s failure in Vietnam.

The urgency of the situation swept aside inhibitions against the use of military force. Indeed, Maureen Dowd of the New York Times exclaimed, “America is at the moment a weird inside-out image of the Vietnam era. The CIA and ROTC are chic on elite campuses, where flags hang from dorm rooms. Police have gone from ‘pigs’ to heroes. And many of those who complained about America’s escalation in Southeast Asia are now complaining about America’s hesitation in Central Asia.”

But not so fast! Even as the nation readied itself for a new and perhaps even more difficult and challenging war, the influence of Vietnam persisted. Most top civilian and

military officials came from the Vietnam generation and they could not help but be shaped by the war that had been the defining event of their generation. Ironically, Bush's secretary of state and a key player in the new war was none other than Colin Powell, and it was predictable that any use of force in this war would follow the doctrine that bore his name. While the war against terrorism promised to be as different from the Vietnam War as each had been from World War II, to some commentators there appeared to be striking—and troubling—parallels. Afghanistan, like Vietnam, had a long history of repelling and humiliating great powers who were foolish enough to get involved there, most recently the Soviet Union, and it was an equally difficult place to fight. “If it sounds like Vietnam, it is, but worse,” one expert predicted. “Vietnam had a coast.” Another described it as a “Vietnam with snow.” A Canadian magazine recounted British and Russian travails in Afghanistan and ended a notably pessimistic piece with morbid lines from Rudyard Kipling: “When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains, And the women come out to cut up what remains, Just roll to your rifle and blow out your brains, An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.”

The point was obvious. Should the United States, like the Soviet Union, Britain and Russia before it, get bogged down in Afghanistan, bitter recollections of Vietnam would resurface and produce demands for the removal of U.S. troops. Thus as the nation embarked on what could surpass Vietnam as the longest and most complex war in its history, it seemed entirely possible that memories of that war might influence the outcome.

During the last week of October 2001, those ghosts arose with a vengeance. The war was in its third week by this time, and the natives were restless. Heavy American

bombing seemed to be doing nothing more than rearranging the rocks in Afghanistan. America's new client, the Northern Alliance, was sitting on its rifles, seemingly waiting for the United States to win its war. At a much-publicized press conference, a Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesman admitted that the Taliban was proving to be a much tougher opponent than had been assumed. ("Admiral Stufflebeem may be the last to know that Afghanistan is a stubborn and durable place, whose history is a long tale of war," the acid-penned Maureen Dowd wrote.)

From the political right and the political left, complaints began to be heard, and they were phrased in terms of Vietnam. The right's main complaint was that the war was being fought too much like Vietnam--with half-measures, rather than all-out, as the situation demanded. Once again, the United States was relying too heavily on air power and was not even using that in full measure. It was trying too hard to appease its allies and the diplomats instead of fighting as the situation required, a "tragic reprise of Vietnam." If things did not change, the outcome, as before, could be "nothing but pain and defeat."

On the other side of the political spectrum, there was ominous talk of a quagmire, long a codeword for Vietnam. "Like an unwelcome specter from an unhappy past," the *New York Times*' Johnny Apple opined on Halloween Day, "the ominous word 'quagmire' has begun to haunt conversations among government officials and students of foreign policy, both here and abroad." Apple had gained notoriety and Lyndon Johnson's undying hostility in August 1967 when he had written a front-page piece for the *Times* proclaiming the Vietnam War a stalemate. Now, he asked, thirty-four years later: "Could Afghanistan become another Vietnam? Is the United States facing another stalemate on the other side of the world?" Apple admitted that the question might be premature. But it

was not unreasonable, he went on to say, “given the scars scoured into the national psyche by defeat in Southeast Asia.” He went on to elaborate a whole series of disturbing parallels: the Northern Alliance seemed as uneager to fight as America’s South Vietnamese ally; the White House continued to insist that the war was going well in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary; the administration seemed to be relying too heavily on air power to cower a tough enemy. The “Q” word was all over Washington that last week in October. “Bush has bungled the challenge,” a *Los Angeles Times*’ columnist observed. “The Vietnam syndrome has gained a new virulence.”

But not so fast--again! In early November, to the shock of many observers, something funny happened on the way to the quagmire. Within several weeks of Vietnam week, the bombing suddenly seemed to be working. The Northern Alliance was actually fighting—and gaining ground. The Taliban was put to the rout, and if Osama Bin Laden was still at large, his organization and headquarters in Afghanistan were in shambles. All of this was accomplished without the commitment of large-scale ground forces and with few American casualties—only one American, a CIA military operative, actually died from enemy gunfire.

What had happened to make such a mockery of the predictions of another Vietnam? For one thing, the Taliban turned out to be less formidable than anticipated. More important, its harsh rule had earned enormous unpopularity across Afghanistan. Thus when crunch time came, it had little support. Equally important was the working of U.S. military power. A lot had happened between Vietnam and Afghanistan, and it showed. It was called the Revolution in Military Affairs (the acronym, RMA). It was pioneered in the Gulf War, applied effectively in the war in Kosovo, and used with even

more devastating effectiveness in Afghanistan. RMA relied on the harnessing of air power to modern technology, lasers, computers, unmanned aircraft, etc., and was directed by Special Forces operating on the ground. The intent was to use precision-guided bombs to strike directly at an enemy's command and control system so that, cut off and isolated from each other, enemy units would be exposed and vulnerable, unable to coordinate their activities in any fashion. What it appeared to do was permit the United States to have its cake and eat it too, to apply enormous military power with devastating results without risking large numbers of ground troops and possibly large American casualties that might have a negative effect on public support for the war. Now it was time for the gloaters to separate Afghanistan from Vietnam. Political pundits went to great lengths to point out the differences between the two wars. The Taliban did not have outside backing, as the North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front had in Vietnam, and indeed Afghan rebels had against the Soviets in the 1980s. Unlike the NLF in South Vietnam, the Taliban was not popular in its own country. Quite the contrary, its repressive rule had stirred up great resentment and opposition. In the Vietnam War and in the Soviet war in Afghanistan, American and Soviet troops were confused and cynical. No such problem in the current war. Elite American forces had a cause and were performing efficiently. "The Vietnam War was a half-proxy war between great powers," journalist Michael Kelly wrote. "There is only one great power in this conflict, and that is the United States. History repeats itself until it doesn't, which is frequently." "As 'quagmires' go," the *Wall Street Journal* clucked in late November, "the one in Afghanistan is looking pretty good." "War works!," screamed the headlines of another article.

Three months later, the war in Afghanistan has settled into a mopping up

operation. Although Bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Omar are still at large, Taliban resistance has pretty much ended, and a new Afghan government with international backing has set about the difficult task of putting together a nation shattered by thirty years of war. The first phase of the long, twilight struggle against terrorism seems to have ended. It is not yet clear where the next front may be: Somalia? Indonesia? Iraq?

Whatever the case, it would appear appropriate at this point to inquire, whether September 11 and the apparent—at least short-term—success of America’s war against terrorism may at last have put the Vietnam Syndrome to rest?

The short answer would appear to be “yes”. The conventional wisdom since September 11 is that the stunning events of that day changed us beyond recognition, in everything from our attitudes toward the outside world to our eating and television-viewing habits. The impact on college students, it is alleged, has been especially profound. According to *Newsweek*, September 11 was their defining moment. It stirred them out of their insularity, awakened an interest in politics and a sense of patriotism, aroused an interest in foreign policy and public service. ROTC was “cool again.”

It is generally assumed that the demise of the Vietnam syndrome is one more indication of the sea change in American attitudes that took place after September 11, and there is evidence to support that. There is ample and persuasive evidence, for example, to suggest that September 11 worked a major change in the popular distrust of government that goes back to the Vietnam era. Polls indicate that in the immediate aftermath of September 11 the percentage of those saying government could be counted on to do the right thing shot up to the highest figures since the 1960s.

In terms of the major issue, the use of military power abroad, the answer would

also appear to be yes, and there are several points worth making here. For one thing, there is considerable polling evidence from the late 1990s to indicate that even before September 11, public opinion was more willing to support the use of force abroad, even if it resulted in casualties, than many politicians and pundits believed. The one requirement was that, unlike Somalia in 1993, for example, the commitment be something that was perceived to be in the nation's vital interests and that the cause was good.

Add to this the Revolution in Military Affairs, which appears to alleviate the need for large-scale conventional forces. This, of course, raises the possibility of war without pain or sacrifice, at least to the United States, and of technology substituting for people. It would appear to reduce the possible situations that would lead to a Vietnam-like quagmire.

These factors plus the apparent success with little human cost and sacrifice—again, at least to the United States—in Afghanistan, suggest that this time the son Bush may well have dispatched the syndrome the father claimed to have buried more than ten years ago. Recent polls, for example, show substantial popular support for taking military action against Iraq and Iran, for using advisers in the Philippines, and even for sending troops there to work with the Philippine army in combat situations. Fifty percent of those polled expressed willingness to use U.S. military power to fight terrorist organizations that are not direct threats in and of themselves.

Nothing is ever as simple or clear cut as it seems, however. Already, a mere five months after September 11, it is becoming clear that the changes allegedly wrought by that day are perhaps less sweeping and may be less enduring than we had assumed. Politics, which had been suspended in the aftermath of the attacks, are more or less back

to normal, and that should not surprise us. Our trust in government has increased markedly, but even at its peak the numbers of those expressing confidence that government could do the right thing did not exceed 42 percent. Early indications that September 11 might make Americans more internationalist in their thinking seem also to have been misplaced. Again, the polling data offers some insights. There was a significant drop, for example, between October 2001 and January 2002 (57 to 42 percent) in the number of those who thought foreign affairs extremely important to the nation's welfare. The percentage of those who thought the war against terrorism was the nation's number one problem dropped from 64 percent to 35 percent. In short, what we saw in September and October 2001 was what political scientists call a rally around the flag effect, a common phenomenon that follows the onset of wars. The most recent experiences of prolonged conflict with large numbers of Americans engaged, Korea and Vietnam, make abundantly clear that it is impossible to sustain this kind of support in conflicts where it is not clear that American aims are being attained.

What this means is that much will depend on what happens from here and what actions leaders take. If there are no further terrorist attacks, especially attacks on U.S. soil, and if the war against terrorism fizzles out—ending with a whimper rather than a bang—the sense of urgency will naturally dissipate, and, as it dissipates, the willingness to use military force may wane. Or, if in Afghanistan or some new, as yet unnamed front in the war against terrorism, should American troops get caught in the crossfire between rival clans or factions, as they did in Somalia in 1993, the old fears may surface again, the ghosts of Vietnam may yet rise out of the desert.

There is one other point worth noting. The generation that now holds political

power has, for good reason, been called the Vietnam generation. It has only recently come into prominence—2000 was the first election in which all major candidates were from that generation. For this group the Vietnam War was the defining event. More than anything else, it helped determine what they believe and who they are. Whether they fought in the war, opposed it, or sought to escape it by joining the National Guard or going to Canada, they were shaped by it; they were scarred by it. It influences the way they look at each other, their country, and the world. “This generation will go to its grave debating Vietnam,” a veteran recently noted. It is therefore entirely possible that in the right circumstances, memories of Vietnam may once again shape decisively the way we respond to events. Despite September 11, Vietnam may remain “the war that never seems to go away.”