

## **What was the significance of the Vietnam War for the Cold War?**

This essay will examine the significance of the conflict in Vietnam on the Cold War, primarily focussing on the aftermath for the main global superpower involved, the United States of America (USA). This conflict has had a long standing legacy for the geopolitical conduct of the USA leading to a period of transition in Cold War diplomacy and analysis of the legitimacy of intervention in states such as Vietnam. It also led to the reassessment of media coverage of Cold War conflicts, indeed any USA conflicts since. As such this essay will address the issues for foreign policy makers during the Cold War when conflicts are so openly presented to domestic audiences and the strategies that were adopted by USA leaders after these events. For many the Vietnam War represents a watershed when the USA was seemingly experiencing a moment of ‘defeat and destabilisation’ and had to reassess its approach to the Cold War, this idea will also be analysed while addressing the essay question.<sup>1</sup>

The first and most obvious impact on the Cold War to come out of the conflict in Vietnam is the fact the USA lost. For Alan Dobson and Steven Marsh, Vietnam saw the end of an American ‘arrogance of power’.<sup>2</sup> When pursuing Cold War policies in ‘Third World’ countries, the USA largely operated from a position of absolute confidence in their military might in order to intimidate and cajole opposition powers and bend them to the American will. This was largely due to the belief that this strategy was the most expedient way of fulfilling the ideals of ‘Containment’, the USA’s policy as derived from George F. Kennan to instigate ‘long term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies’.<sup>3</sup> The USA entered Vietnam with the expectation of a swiftly fought victory

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<sup>1</sup> E., Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes 1914-1991*, (London: Abacus, 1995), p. 244.

<sup>2</sup> A. P., Dobson, and S., Marsh (eds.), *US Foreign Policy since 1945*, (London: Routledge: 2001), p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> J.L., Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.4.

against the spread of Communist ideals into South Vietnam, and the greater South-East Asian area.<sup>4</sup> This was soon seen as a grossly naïve appraisal of the war that was going to be fought in the jungles of Vietnam. Conventional war was not fought by the North Vietnamese and the USA's persistence in pursuing a limited war to attain Cold War objectives, against a highly motivated and entirely dedicated opposition led to the futile loss of not just American soldiers but the utter devastation of the country they were trying to save from Communism.<sup>5</sup>

The significance for the Cold War here for the USA, a point ignored by the Russians as they experienced their own chastening experience in Afghanistan, was that conventional military might did not translate into the ability to manifest power in various theatres of the Cold War. The most notable individual to fail in understanding this point early in the Vietnam War was Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, who in a memo in October 1966 to then president Lyndon B. Johnson pointed out that:

‘One thing demonstrably going for us in Vietnam over the past year has been the number of enemy killed in action resulting from the big military operations’.<sup>6</sup>

The various complex motivations for North Vietnamese combatants, those of anti-colonialism, nationalism and Communist ideals, were seemingly misunderstood. The conflict was treated too simplistically as a product of ‘Containment’ that could be won by killing the enemy. Vietnam served as a wake-up call that the battle of ‘hearts and minds’ had to be won, as those people you are looking to keep free from Communism may in fact not find it constructive having full blown conflict fought in their communities.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A. P., Dobson, and S., Marsh (eds.), *US Foreign Policy since 1945*, p.77.

<sup>5</sup> A. P., Dobson, and S., Marsh (eds.), *US Foreign Policy since 1945*, p.89.

<sup>6</sup> J., Nashel, ‘The Road to Vietnam: Modernisation Theory in Fact and Fiction’ in Appy, C.G. (ed.), *Cold War Constructions*, (Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), p.146.

<sup>7</sup>J.,Schell, ‘The Long Shadow of Vietnam’, in J., Roper (ed.), *The United States and the Legacy of the Vietnam War*, (London: Palgrave, 2007), p23.

Beyond these lessons the USA also had to re-evaluate the policy of ‘Containment’ in light of their Vietnamese experience. It was no longer seen as practical to treat Communism as some ‘monolithic’ entity that put ‘vital US interests at stake everywhere’.<sup>8</sup> Instead after the 1968 presidential election of Richard Nixon there was a more nuanced approach to Cold War power balances. Rather than approaching Communism as a solid ideological camp, it was better understood that during the Vietnam War the major Communist powers, Russia and China, had not acted in an entirely conducive way. They had each separately provided material for the North Vietnamese, but they were engaged in frosty diplomatic relations over the ‘soul of the Vietnamese struggle’.<sup>9</sup> Here Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger saw a more practical means of foreign policy that moved away from the limited structures of the dichotomy of Cold War geopolitics. Rather than treating the global balance of power as a ‘zero sum game’ in which ‘gains’ for one side meant ‘losses’ for the other the USA began to take into account that Communism could be engaged to check Communism.<sup>10</sup> As such there began increased diplomatic relations between the USA and both of these large Communist powers. Soviet-Sino relations were at an all-time low in 1969, and it was judged that the USA take advantage of this to diplomatically contact the powers separately and move toward the multilateral power dynamic that Nixon and Kissinger sought, as stated by Kissinger:

“If relations could be developed with both the Soviet Union and China the triangular relationship would provide us with a greater opportunity for peace”<sup>11</sup>

Overall Vietnam helped to highlight the weaknesses and deficiencies of the USA’s foreign policy for the steadily diversifying theatre of international diplomacy. It gave rise to a greater

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<sup>8</sup> A. P., Dobson, and S., Marsh (eds.), *US Foreign Policy since 1945*, p.89.

<sup>9</sup> S.J., Ball, *The Cold War: An International History 1947-1991*, (London: Arnold, 1998), p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> J.L., Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p.277.

<sup>11</sup> R. B., Levering, *The Cold War: A Post Cold War History*, (Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 1994), p.131.

understanding that the call for ultimate victory over the Communist's was inapplicable, particularly if the USA was unable to understand and conclude a conflict such as that in Vietnam. Therefore links with China and Russia should be stabilised in a 'semi-permanent structure of international relations' to maintain peace.<sup>12</sup>

However this view of foreign policy was not held by many individuals within Congress and it was following the disaster in Vietnam that these dissident voices came much more to the fore of American politics. Prior to Vietnam there had been to the largest extent a consensus within American society on the direction and purpose of foreign policy.<sup>13</sup> There was no longer one view on the USA's correct role in world affairs. As previously examined during this essay there was not complete faith in the aims and objectives of 'Containment' as it had previously manifested itself. Instead Nixon and Kissinger sought a balance and greater diplomacy between the superpowers; in short the USA was now entering the period of Détente.<sup>14</sup> This policy was divisive though. For many the idea of managing parity with the Soviet Union in the wake of such an embarrassing defeat in Vietnam seemed illogical.<sup>15</sup> This was to be a defining aspect in the management of Cold War foreign policy within the USA after Vietnam. The policies and actions of the executive were not in line with the views of public or congressional consensus all of the time due to the fact that many no longer took the views of the president as the overriding guide for foreign policy.<sup>16</sup>

There were a variety of reasons for this new found lack of faith in the leadership of the president in foreign policy, though Vietnam is clearly the most significant during this period. The policies that led to the USA's involvement within the conflict under various administrations had been allowed to go ahead due to the belief that presidential leadership

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<sup>12</sup> S.J., Ball, *The Cold War: An International History 1947-1991*, 00p. 141.

<sup>13</sup> R. B., Levering, *The Cold War: A Post Cold War History*, p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> S.J., Ball, *The Cold War: An International History 1947-1991*, p. 171.

<sup>15</sup> S.J., Ball, *The Cold War: An International History 1947-1991*, p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> R. B., Levering, *The Cold War: A Post Cold War History*, p. 147.

was the way forward for a strong check on Communism. Throughout the '50s and '60s billions of tax payers' dollars were dutifully voted through Congress to aid the fight on Communism in Indochina, a blind eye was turned to the full extent of CIA operations on the ground and American people were systematically manipulated and lied to by the administrations they had voted into power.<sup>17</sup> These facts would be revealed throughout the early '70s in a variety of ways but none more telling than those published as part of the 'Pentagon Papers'. These leaked documents had a considerable effect on the backing that presidential foreign policy could rely upon. It helped to sway some people in their view that the government had long known the commitment into Vietnam had been a mistake.<sup>18</sup> This combined with the decision to try and suppress additional excerpts further fed the fires that the presidency had been abusing the trust of the people with regard to Vietnam. It was only logical to apply scrutiny to future presidential decisions in the Cold War to avoid this in the future.<sup>19</sup>

In this regard the Vietnam War also provides a significant change within the Cold War context. It illustrated the ability of domestic opinion to shape and change the actions of the USA in foreign policy. The shattering of consensus that followed the Vietnam War was seen most clearly in the actions and protests of the period on home soil. This pressured those in power and helped push through the eventual withdrawal from the conflict. The spectre of a pointless conflict that hung over the USA with few tangible results would help shape the way those in power would engage in the Cold War.<sup>20</sup> For many of those in office at the time this change in public opinion was largely due to the media representation of the conflict and its undermining effects, for instance the publishing of the 'Pentagon Papers'.<sup>21</sup> This has led to

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<sup>17</sup> R. B., Levering, *The Cold War: A Post Cold War History*, p. 147.

<sup>18</sup> R.D., Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.290.

<sup>19</sup> R.D., Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.291.

<sup>20</sup> R.D., Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.333.

<sup>21</sup> D.C., Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, (London: University of California Press, 1986), p. 211.

the creation of an argument centred on a kind of ‘stab in the back’ regarding the defeat in Vietnam. Famously Dean Rusk when asked about the reason for defeat in Vietnam by Nixon suggested it “it was lost in the editorial rooms of this country”.<sup>22</sup> The will of the country appears to have given out in this appraisal of the defeat in Vietnam, and this is significant for the Cold War as it suggests that the will to defeat Communism in the USA could be undermined by the effects of the media. In addition to this however it must be accepted that the media and its effects on public opinion were in reality part of the greater feeling of contempt for the progress of the war. It was a ‘limited war’ that had far outstripped the constraints and costs that the American people and indeed policymakers had originally expected.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless which analysis appears most apt, what cannot be ignored is the level of secrecy, censorship and suppression that would occur following Vietnam with regard to American involvement in conflicts. ‘Americanisation’ of Cold War conflicts would not occur en masse ever again. The suggestion that American troops being thrown into another Vietnam for the domestic audience to see was tantamount to political suicide. Instead policies of proxy wars such as those fought throughout the ‘Third World’ were adopted as a way of continuing the Cold War fight, without the overt American losses that the Vietnam War incurred. It had created a ‘persistent distrust of public institutions and the officials who ran them’ and a fear of another fruitless conflict and mass American losses.<sup>24</sup> The media remained a key cog in presenting this to the public for the remainder of the Cold War.

Overall this essay has examined the significant effects that the Vietnam War had upon the conduct of the USA during the Cold War and how this affected foreign policy and balance of international power. It has analysed the limitations of the war effort and the effects

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<sup>22</sup> J., Schell, ‘The Long Shadow of Vietnam’, p.28.

<sup>23</sup> D.C., Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, p.213.

<sup>24</sup> R.D., Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, pp.335-36.

of defeat on the geopolitical strategies of the USA and its contribution to the adoption of Détente. Reference has been made to the undermining effects that the Vietnam War had for popular consensus on foreign policy and trust in the executive on the domestic front, paying attention to the way the media was involved in this. Finally it has shown that the legacy of the Vietnam War was felt throughout the rest of the Cold War in the distrust that the public had for its institutions and how this shaped USA policy with regard to the use of American troops. The analysis of this essay and the points it has explored are neatly summarised by the historian Robert Schulzinger as he states:

‘American leaders conducted their foreign and military policies from the 1970s to the early years of the twenty-first century with an eye to their unhappy experiences in the Vietnam War.’<sup>25</sup>

*Alex Berry, 708294@swansea.ac.uk*

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<sup>25</sup> R.D., Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 183.

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